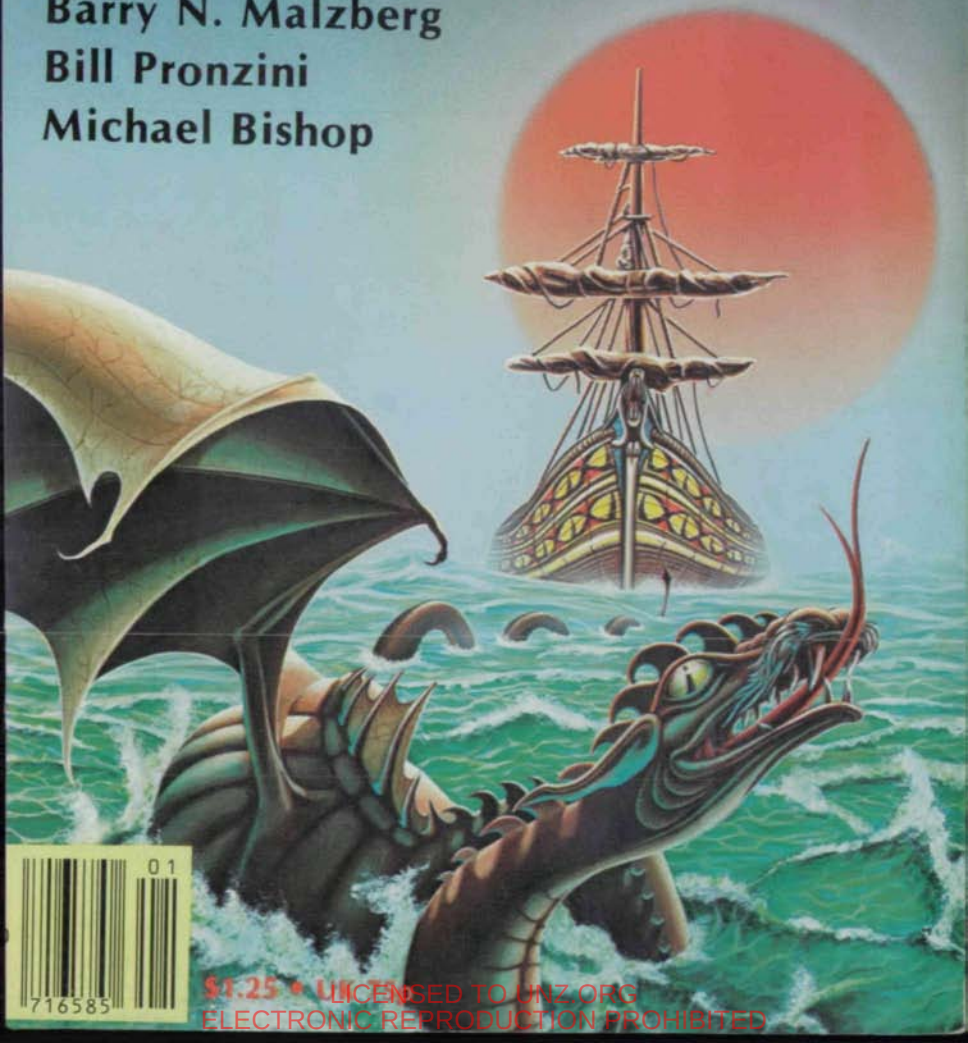
Isaac Asimov

NEUTRALITY!

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

Robert Silverberg
Robert F. Young
Barry N. Malzberg
Bill Pronzini
Michael Bishop



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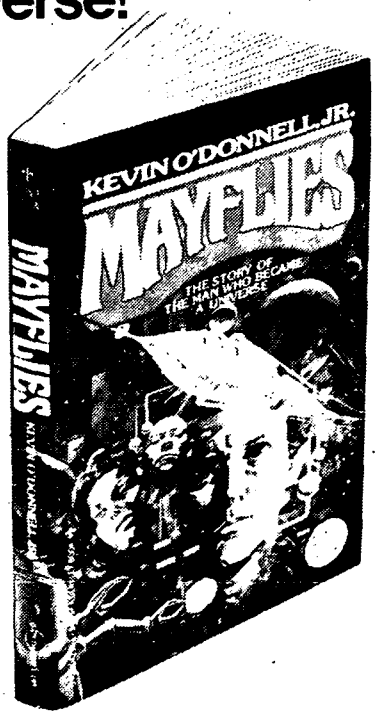

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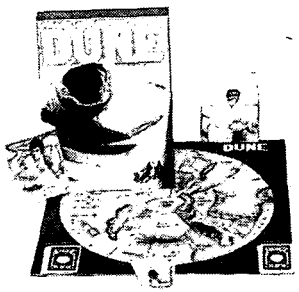

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Robert Young wrote about John Starfinder and Ciely Bleu and their space whale in "The Star Eel," June 1977; however you need not have read that story to enjoy this further adventure in time and space of this most appealing trio.

The Haute Bourgeoisie

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

"It seems to me, Starfinder," Ciely Bleu declares one evening, her blue-flower eyes fixed on the timescreen in the whaleship's lounge, "that a disproportionate amount of Earth's history consists of people crossing things. Moses crossing the Red Sea, Alexander the Great crossing the Hellespont, Hannibal crossing the Alps, Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Columbus crossing the Atlantic, Balboa crossing the Isthmus of Panama, and now Samuel Johnson crossing Inner Temple Lane."

"You're a fine one to be complaining," Starfinder says. "What other twelve-year-old girl from Renascence — or from any of the other terrestrialized planets, for that matter — has ever before been treated to a spacewhale's eyeview of history?"

"I *wasn't* complaining. I was merely giving verbal vent to a perspicacious observation." Then, "Look! — Dr. Johnson almost fell!"

"He'll be all right," Starfinder reassures her. "He's only got a few more steps to go to reach his doorway."

"He's counting them, I'll bet."

"I wouldn't doubt it."

Judging from the stick figure that takes shape in both their minds, the whale, which communicates tele-hieroglyphically, is somewhat contemptuous of Dr. Johnson's alcoholic propensities:

"I don't think that was a very nice thing to 'say,' Charles," Ciely says. "Charles" is her name for the whale. "After all, Dr. Johnson *did* compile the first English lexicon, and without so much as a smidgin of help from that

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snooty Lord Chesterfield either! He earned the right to at least a little leeway in his social activities, *I* think!"

"Well, anyway, he made it home," says Starfinder, as the door of No. 1 Inner Temple Lane closes behind the subject of their conversation. "In a few more minutes he'll be safe in bed. And speaking of bed —"

Sadness shadows Ciely's thin face, darkening her blue-flower eyes. "Couldn't we tune in one more place-time first, Starfinder? This is my final night on board the whale, you know."

"You promised Inner Temple Lane would be the last."

"I know. But people are prone to promise almost anything when they're on the verge of desperation. Anyway, what difference does it make what time I get up tomorrow morning? You said yourself you're going to have Charles resurface off Renascence just three weeks after I stole — just three weeks after I disappeared. So no matter how long he remains in the Sea of Time, future time won't pass for us."

"Maybe so, but in future time you've been missing for three whole weeks, and your parents must be worried sick."

"But they won't be worried any sicker no matter how long we stay in the past. Assuming they *are* worried sick."

Starfinder sighs. "One more then. What would you like to see?"

"Not what. Whom. I want to see Elizabeth Barrett when she was still living at No. 50 Wimpole St. Before she married Robert. When she was composing her *Sonnets*."

"And when was that?"

"A.D. 1845," Ciely answers. "In the spring, I should think."

Starfinder sighs again. "It'll be a tough one to tune in, but I'll try."

Starfinder is a strange man. Who else but a strange man would choose, in the very prime of life, to live out the rest of his years in the belly of a converted space whale? A spacewhale that, despite its ability to plumb the depths of the Sea of Time, to see and hear for millions of miles while simultaneously seeing and hearing inside itself, to exceed by far the velocities of ordinary whaleships (i.e., dead ones); despite its compartmented, superbly appointed, phosphorescence-illuminated interior, its self replenishing life-support system, its hot and cold running water, its well-stocked larder, its luxurious lounge, its commercially viable holds; despite its high intelligence, its fine sensibilities, its sense of humor — that, despite all these abilities, these assets, these qualities, is still, basically, nothing more than a sentient, self-propelled asteroid?

He leaves the lounge, walks down the fore-to-aft middeck corridor to the forward companionway and ascends it to the bridge. When he tapped the audio-visual "petal" of the whale's huge, rose-like ganglion and linked it electromagnetically to the lounge-

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viewscreen, he also attuned the onboard computer (installed as a matter of course by the Altair IV orbital shipyard converters) to the ganglion's "stem," or thought-center. The whale can resurface to any spatio-temporal coign of vantage it chooses, provided the co-ordinates don't coincide with its dive-point, but were Starfinder to "say," *No. 50 Wimpole St. London, England, Earth; spring, A.D. 1845*, it might not know what he is talking about, even though, during the brief span of their relationship, it has assimilated a large percentage of his lore. So, instead, he feeds the information into the computer, which translates it into co-ordinates more readily comprehensible to the whale, whereupon the whale re-enters the Sea of Time, resurfaces and reorients itself. The transition is almost instantaneous, and Earth, after briefly blanking out, reappears in the center of the bridge viewscreen. Only the different positions of the constellations, the moon and Venus (the other solar planets are beyond the periphery of the screen) indicate that the whale now occupies a new coign of vantage and that over half a century has gone by.

Starfinder returns to the lounge, where Ciely Bleu is leaning forward in her viewchair, gazing at the new London that has replaced the old. Inner Temple Lane still fills the screen. It has changed, but not very much. The problem is to get from it to Wimpole St. — a problem that the whale, which, of necessity, knows no more about nineteenth-century London than Starfinder does, dumped on his lap.

Resignedly, he kneels before the timescreen and begins fiddling with the banks of dials that flank it and for whose complexity he alone — as an amateur electronics engineer — is responsible. Inner Temple Lane gives way to White Chapel — the territory-to-be of Jack the Ripper. He continues to fiddle. Buckingham Palace, Baker St. (*Baker* St.?), Bunhill Row ... Only through sheer chance does he finally find the street he is looking for, after which it is a cinch to tune in No. 50.

Ciely leans forward in her viewchair. It is late afternoon, and there are a number of carriages passing on the street. Starfinder continues to work the dials. Presently a kitchen appears (walls are no barrier to the whale's vision). In it, a dowdy servant woman is standing over a grotesque cast-iron stove, on which the contents of a large cast-iron pot are bubbling (the whale's olfactory range is severely limited, which, in the present instance, is probably just as well). Starfinder next tunes in a study, in which an austere old man is sitting at a desk, poring over a pile of papers; then a large living room, in which two young men are lolling. And then, suddenly, a bedsitting room appears, in which an attractive woman in her late 30s is reclining in her armchair, her legs covered with a lap robe.

"It's her, Starfinder!" Ciely cries.

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"It's 'Ba.' You've found her, Starfinder. You've found her!"

Starfinder returns to his viewchair and sits back down. Ciely is still leaning forward in hers. Presently, "But she's not writing anything, Starfinder. She's just sitting there, doing nothing. Why isn't she composing the *Sonnets from the Portuguese?*"

Starfinder is tempted to point out that, were they to look in on any woman of moderate or above-moderate means, in any given age, they would probably find her sitting, doing nothing; but he refrains. For one thing, Elizabeth Barrett is an invalid; for another, it will serve no practical purpose to taint his starry-eyed ward with his own cynicism.

Elizabeth Barrett's eyes, it soon becomes apparent, are closed. Moreover, her breast is rising and falling with telltale evenness. Lying face-down at her feet, in a puddle of afternoon sunshine, is a book that has apparently slipped from her lap.

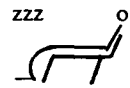
"Do you know what?" Starfinder says. "I think she's sleeping."

"She is *not!* Do you think for one minute she'd fall asleep over a volume of Robert's poems?"

"But we don't know that it *is* a volume of his poems."

"What *else* would she be reading with their marriage only a year away?"

The whale is of the same mind as Starfinder.



it observes.

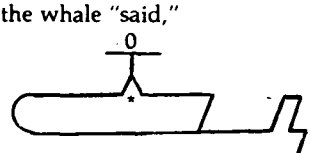
"Oh, *you!*' Ciely says.

"Well whether she's asleep or not," says Starfinder, "I know someone who should be."

Slowly Ciely gets to her feet. She gives him a long, reproachful look and makes as though to turn her back on him and march out of the lounge. Then, abruptly, she darts over and kisses him, whispers "Good night" into his ear, and runs aft to her cabin, which is next to his, and which she refers to as her "room."

Long after she leaves, he can feel the moist coolness of her kiss upon his cheek, but he is totally unaffected by it. He cannot afford to be affected by moist kisses bestowed by innocent young maidens overflowing with love and affection, because the problem that confronts him requires a cold objectivity of thought that cannot be attained if he is to allow himself to be sidetracked by silly sentimentality.

In a way, the roots of the problem go back to when he was a converter in the Orbital Shipyards of Altair IV; to when the whale "said,"



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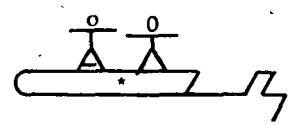
indicating that if he would repair its unique auxiliary ganglion, which the Jonah who destroyed the primary one hadn't known existed, it would obey his every command for the rest of its life and take him where/whenever he wished to go in ⌊___⌋ (space) and ⌊ (time).

But the roots can be traced back farther yet. They can be traced back to the days when he himself was a Jonah and killed spacewhales, ostensibly for a living but actually out of revenge for his having been temporarily blinded by one, and scarred for life. Killed them, till one day he saw his face in one and could kill them no longer.

The complexity of problems is no new thing under the suns, but the complexity of this one is nevertheless unique. Ciely Bleu, at odds with the proletariat-cathected society she grew up in on Renascence (*a* Andromedae IX) and whose members she scornfully calls the *"haute bourgeoisie"* because of their middle-class values and because they put on "parvenu airs," stole a star eel that was undergoing experimental conversion out of the Renascence Orbital Shipyards (where her father is employed as a converter) to keep it from being "enslaved." Three weeks later (Renascence time), the eel, which she had named "Pasha" and which she loved, affixed itself to Starfinder's whale and began absorbing its 2-omicron-vii lifeblood. Starfinder boarded the eel, conned Ciely into returning with him to the whale, where he talked her into calling the eel off. The whale, acting out of instinct, promptly rammed the eel, destroying it. Starfinder should have anticipated this, but he didn't.

The eel, despite its gargantuan size, was Ciely's pet, and its death overwhelmed her. The whale, contrite, substituted itself.



it "said," indicating that she and Starfinder and itself would henceforth be three comrades in the Sea of ⌊___⌋ and ⌊. The antidote worked, and she has come to love "Charles" as much as she loved "Pasha." It is now up to Starfinder to return her to her *"haute bourgeoisie"* parents.

Well, this doesn't seem like much of a problem. There will be tears involved, of course, and sad farewells; but eventually Ciely will forget Starfinder and the whale and come to love her *"haute bourgeoisie"* parents, however much she may think she despises them. But wait: there are financial and legal complications to contend with. The star eel she stole was the property of Renascence's Orbital Shipyards (OrbShipCo.), and, at a conservative esitmate, was worth in the neighborhood of $10,000,000,000. It is doubtful that Renascence law will allow a twelve-year-old girl to be prosecuted for grand larceny; nevertheless, some-

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one is going to have to pay the $10,000,000,000 back.

Starfinder is as poor as a churchmouse. He doesn't even own his own whaleship — at least not legally.

No doubt Ciely's parents are moderately well-to-do and have money in the bank in the city of Kirth, which is the New Bedford of the star-eel industry and the headquarters of OrbShipCo. But how are they going to raise $10,000,000,000? How, for that matter, if their daughter can be prosecuted, are they going to raise enough to cover the fee of a lawyer crafty enough to keep her out of jail?

Problem? This is no problem. This is a brick wall. A four-dimensional brick wall that slams against you just as hard when you try to climb over it or to go around it or to burrow under it as it does when you try to barge right through it.

But fortunately Starfinder has in his possession a four-dimensional sledge hammer in the form of a whale.

He turns off the timescreen, retires to his cabin and has the wardrobizer outfit him in nondescript apparel that will pass uncommented upon where and when he is going. From a secret drawer of his desk he removes a pair of telekinetic dice and slips them into one of the pockets of his nondescript coat. Into another pocket he slips an ostentatious bauble that can easily be converted into legal tender. Then he leaves the cabin, makes his way forward and ascends the companionway to the bridge. There, via the computer, he programs the whale to surface five hundred miles off the shores of Kirth (well beyond the orbiting dead star-eels and the conversion docks and the space stations that constitute the orbital shipyards) at a temporal level when Kirth was a small town and the star-eel industry was still in its embryonic stage, and he post-programs the whale to dive the moment he departs in the lifeboat and to resurface one Renascence month later at a corresponding point in space. Then he girds himself and descends to the boat-bay. He has a busy "night" before him.

"You look bushed, Starfinder," Ciely says over her cereal. "Didn't you sleep well last night?"

Starfinder fortifies himself with a second cup of coffee and dials an order of toast and scrambled synthi-eggs. In the galley viewscreen, *a* Andromedae hangs like a dazzling Christmas-tree ornament from the black branches of the fir of space. In the foreground, hogging most of the screen, Renascence turns imperceptibly on its axis, its dayside green-gold, and tinged with blue. The orbital shipyards, visible only on the nightside, bring to mind a moving semicircle of twinkling trinkets.

"Where did those little crow's feet at the corners of your eyes come from?" Ciely asks, when Starfinder makes no reply. "They weren't there last night."

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"I didn't know there were any crow's feet at the corners of my eyes."

"Well there are."

Starfinder doesn't argue. Instead, he tackles his order of toast and scrambled synthi-eggs. He is wearing his captain's uniform. It is white, with gold piping. The left side of the coat front is hung with seven rows of multi-colored ribbons, to each of which is appended a gleaming, meaningless medal. The epaulets match, in both color and design, the décor on the fore-piece of the white hat, which rests on the table near his elbow, and bear a strong resemblance to the scrambled snythi-eggs he is eating. The white trousers have triple creases and are tucked neatly into black, synthi-leather boots that are so highly polish-ed you can see your face in them. The uniform came with the whale.

Ciely is staring at the viewscreen. Her abbreviated khaki dress, faded from many washings, gives evidence from its tightness of the weight she has gained during her sojourn in the belly of the whale. "Are you going to come and see me after they put me in jail, Starfinder?"

"No one's going to put you in jail, Ciely. Everything's been taken care of."

She doesn't seem to hear him. "I'll get life at least. And my mother and father will gloat. 'Steal a $10,000,000,000 star-eel, will you?' my father will say. 'Well, you're getting your just desserts.'"

"But, Ciely, you're not going to jail."

"The *haute bourgeoisie* are like that, you know. They don't care about their children. All they care about is time-and-a-half on Saturdays and double-time on Sundays."

"Ciely, listen —"

"My father is so hungry he works every Sunday they let him. He's a brown-noser too. Every Christmas he gives the shift leader a case of Scotch."

"Ciely, I don't have any choice. I *have* to take you home."

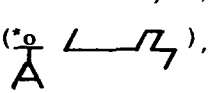
"I know. My debt to society must be paid."

"It has nothing to do with your debt to society. Anyway, there's no longer any such debt. But I still have to take you home. You belong with your parents, with young people your own age. You can't grow up in a spacewhale with no one to keep you company but an old man of thirty-three."

She begins to cry. The handle of her spoon protrudes forlornly from her forgotten bowl of cereal. Her glass of synthi-milk stands untouched by the synthi-sugar bowl.

Starfinder is a great hand with children in distress. He sits there wood-enly in his dazzling captain's uniform, like a bemedaled bump on a log. Oh, he is a great hand with them, all right.

It is up to the whale to save the day. With its usual *savoir-faire*, it does so:



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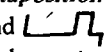
it says, signifying, by the juxtaposition of itself (*), Ciely ( ) and  (space-time), that they will always be comrades no matter how far they may drift apart.

"I know, Charles," Ciely whispers. "I know we will." She dries her eyes with her napkin and stands up. "I'm ready, Starfinder." And then, *I love you, Charles. Goodby.*

The lifeboat lands in a big backyard beside an inground swimming pool. It is night, and there is the scent of new-mown grass.

"Where are we, Starfinder? Whose house is that?"

"Mine," Starfinder answers.

She stares at it. It is three-storied, cupolaed, multiwindowed. Behind it is a big double garage. A driveway winds around the house and down a grassy slope and joins hands with a highway. There are no other houses for miles around — only fields and trees. In the distance, the lights of a large city can be seen.

Starfinder opens the garage door, pushes the lifeboat inside, next to a big, black limousine. Ciely helps him. "I suppose you're going to tell me that's your car, too."

"One of them. I loaned the other one to my lawyer."

"You're putting me on, Starfinder. How can you possibly own a house in the country and two limousines when you just this minute set foot on Renascence for the first time?"

"What makes you so sure it's the first time?"

Ciely gasps. "You pastbacked!"

Starfinder nods. "And not just once, either. I tried to tell you at breakfast, but you wouldn't listen. Come on, let's go inside."

The downstairs lights wink on as they approach the house. A tall, spare man, clad in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers, meets them at the back door, and they step into a large, brightly illumined kitchen. "This is Arthur, my carkeeper," Starfinder says. "Arthur, this is my niece, Ciely Bleu."

Arthur nods. He yawns. "I heard the grodge door open and figured it was prob'ly you." He yawns again. "I'm goin' back t'bed."

"Since when have I been your niece?" Ciely asks, after Arthur leaves the room.

"Since two weeks ago, when I adopted your family."

"Starfinder, you take the cake."

"Speaking of cake, I had Arthur order one for the occasion." He glances at the digital kitchen-clock, which registers 4:57 A.M. "But I forgot we'd be arriving so early."

"What does our arriving here early have to do with it?"

Starfinder doesn't argue. He finds the cake in one of the inbuilt cupboards and sets it on the kitchen table. He takes a container of milk out of the refrigerator and gets together a plate, a glass and a knife and fork. He and Ciely sit down across from each other at

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the table. The cake is a chocolate one with white icing. Ciely cuts a big piece and puts it on her plate. "Aren't you going to have any, Starfinder?"

"No."

He gazes thoughtfully through the big picture window that the table adjoins. Dawn has daubed the eastern horizon with pastel pink. Against the pinkness the city of Kirth shows as a serrated silhouette. He stares at it for some time, then he returns his gaze to Ciely, who is starting in on her second piece of cake.

"First of all, Ciely, from here on in, you must call me 'Uncle John.' As you probably know, on Renascence a man of sufficient means and with no family of his own can adopt a family, if it has no objections, and assume an avuncular status. Two weeks ago, via my lawyer, I adopted yours. Subsequently, my lawyer informed your mother and father that I owned the eel you'd stolen and that in pursuing you in my whaleship I accidentally rammed the eel and destroyed it, imperiling your life in the process. I had to put in the last part, because my imperiling your life makes my adoption of your family seem like an act of contrition, and therefore believable. By the same token, it's understandable why I'm not bringing charges against you for the theft, even though the OrbShipCo insurance underwriters probably won't pay off.

"My lawyer also informed your mother and father that you're safe and sound and that I'm bringing you home. Ostensibly, I made all these arrangements via radio while still in space, traveling at minus-^{C} velocities; actually, of course, I made them during my most recent pastback."

Ciely is staring at him. "You *owned* Pasha?"

Starfinder nods. "But I didn't know it, of course, before last night."

"But how could you possibly have managed to buy a star eel worth billions of dollars?"

"I started out with a pair of telekinetic dice, way back when. I invested my winnings in OrbShipCo stock and arranged for the dividends to be paid into a trust fund for my 'son.' I was able to do this because there's no 'in-being' law in the commonwealth of Kirth. I then returned twenty-some years later *as* my 'son,' invested the dividend earnings in more OrbShipCo stock and in various other corporations related to the star-eel industry, and set up a second trust fund for a second 'son,' and so on. Originally, to explain my periodic absences — disappearances, in the eyes of my 'contemporaries' — I passed myself off as a space sailor. Lately, I've assumed the role of a whaleship captain. My name, incidentally, is no longer just 'John Starfinder.' It's 'John Starfinder VI.' This house has been in the 'Starfinder family' for 'generations.' Arthur is the most recent of a long line of caretakers. I hired him when I hired Ralph."

"Ralph?"

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"He's my chauffeur. It would look funny, don't you think, to own two limousines and not have a chauffeur?"

"Yes, I guess it would," Ciely says weakly. She takes a deep breath. "Starfinder—"

"'Uncle John,'" he corrects her.

"Uncle John, you did all those things, you went to such fantastic lengths, just to keep me from going to *jail?*"

"I don't think you'd have gone to jail, Ciely."

"But, just the same, you did them because you thought I might."

"Among other things."

"But if you could do all that, Starfinder—"

"'Uncle John.'"

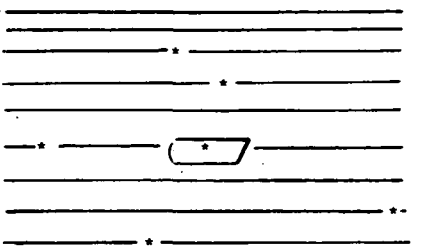
"But if you could do all that, Uncle John, why couldn't you have fixed things so that I *didn't* steal Pasha? So that he'd still be alive?"

Starfinder shakes his head sadly. "I couldn't, Ciely. You can add to the past, but you can't subtract from it. The death of anything or anyone can never be deleted."

He looks through the window at the nascent day. The pinkness along the eastern horizon has paled and spread high into the sky. A band of saffron-yellow light has come into being just beneath it. The serrated silhouette of Kirth is more distinct now, and somehow sinister.

He contacts the whale, which is in synchronous orbit. *Is all well, whale?*

The answer comes back at once:



Yes, all is well.

"Come on, Ciely, I'll show you the rest of the house. Then, as soon as you've had a chance to digest your 'breakfast,' we'll take a morning dip in the pool. Afterward, you can put on one of the new outfits I bought you and pack the rest. When Ralph shows up, I'll have him bring the car around to the front, and we'll get an early start."

The big, black limousine noses through suburban traffic, makes a right turn, then a left. Then another right. To a large extent, Renascence's society is an atavism — a reversion to twentieth-century North America's. Such atavisms are fairly common among terrestrialized societies and are generally the result of a similarity of ages and beginnings. It is true that on Renascence there were no Indians to contend with, but there were indigenes of like nature that had to be — and of course were — subdued.

Ralph makes another right turn. "Are you sure you gave him the right address, Ciely?" Starfinder asks. "We seem to be traveling in a circle."

Ciely is wearing an azure dress, a

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little white tam with a blue pompon, and white platform-sandals. On her lap rests a small, white handbag. "I'm positive, Uncle John." Then, peering over Ralph's shoulder, "There it is — just up ahead. That sort of squarish house."

The adjective is of next to no help, for all the houses on the block are sort of squarish. But Ralph has no trouble finding the right driveway and pulls into it and parks behind a cinnamon-colored runabout with a red roof. If any question exists in Starfinder's mind that it is the right driveway, a cast-aluminum sign placed conspicuously on the adjacent front lawn, reading THE BLEUS, dispels it.

A little concrete walk leads up from the sidewalk, past a large flowerbed, to the front porch. Standing on the porch are a man and a woman, who have just come out of the house. Both are about Starfinder's age. The man is short and heavy-set and has a faint stubble of beard. He is wearing work clothes. The woman is svelte, and, at first glance, has eyes that are twins of Ciely's. She is wearing an abbreviated housedress with little pots and pans printed all over it.

Ciely, who up until a moment ago had not spoken since they left Starfinder's house in the country, gives a little gasp, jumps out of the car and runs across the lawn. The man and woman come running to meet her, and the three of them embrace.

Starfinder experiences a twinge of envy, but it is only a very faint one. After an appropriate interval, he gets out of the limousine and, carrying Ciely's suitcase, skirts the flowerbed, which has a little white wire fence around it, and walks over to where the trio are standing and introduces himself. His first close-up impression of Mr. and Mrs. Bleu is that they have remarkably protuberant eyes. Then he remembers that he is wearing his captain's uniform and that they have never seen such an ensemble before.

All up and down the street, people are standing on their front porches, gawking. On two or three front lawns, small children are playing; the older ones, apparently, are in school.

Mrs. Bleu kisses him on the cheek. Mr. Bleu shakes hands with him. "We sure appreciate you adopting us and bringing our dotter back safe and sound," Mr. Bleu says solemnly.

"From the bottoms of our hearts," says Mrs. Bleu.

"I just got off work," Mr. Bleu announces. "I'm on the night shift this week. After I get off work, I always have a couple of beers. Last night, that suckhole Skeechy Klodzow squawked about me getting so much overtime, and the shift leader told me to take tonight off, so I'm going to have more than just a couple. How about joining me, Uncle John?"

"Sure, I'll have a beer with you," Starfinder says.

"Mildred, open two tall, cold ones."

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I'll do better than that," Mrs. Bleu laughs, heading for the house. "I'll open three."

Starfinder and Mr. Bleu follow, and Ciely, left alone on the lawn, hurries after them. As Starfinder is about to ascend the porch steps, someone taps him on the shoulder. Turning, he beholds Ralph, the chauffeur.

"Yes, Ralph?"

"You forgot to invite me, sir."

"Invite *you*? Invite you where?"

"Along."

"What he means is," Mr. Bleu explains, "is that according to the rules and regulations of the Personnel Carriers' Union, whenever a carrier is going to be kept waiting more than five minutes he's supposed to be treated as a social equal by his employer."

"But *I* can't invite him into *your* house," Starfinder objects.

"What d'you mean, you can't? Where you been living all these years, Uncle John?"

Starfinder realizes he has stubbed his toe. During his pastbacks, he was so busy playing the stock market that he neglected to bone up on unions and union regulations, and on social customs in general. Now, it is too late.

Ciely comes to his rescue. "Star—Uncle John spends most of his time in space. He *is* a whaleship captain, you know. He can hardly be expected to keep up to date on employee privileges and other such things."

"No, I suppose not," Mr. Bleu concedes.

"Will you join us for a beer, Ralph?" Starfinder asks.

"Don't mind if I do."

"Mildred!" Mr. Bleu bellows. "Open up another tall, cold one for our friend Ralph."

***

The three men sit down in the Bleus' living room, Mr. Bleu in a commodious armchair, Starfinder on a settee and Ralph on a ten-foot-long sofa. The room is a pleasant one, with lace curtains frilling the windows and a staircase showing in the background. In addition to the aforementioned articles of furniture, there are a long, low coffee table, two end tables, a knick-knack cabinet, two floor lamps, two table lamps and a hassock. A huge holosole occupies almost an entire wall. Above the mantel of an electric fireplace hangs a romanticized painting of Armstrong taking his first small step on the moon. For some reason, Starfinder is reminded of an antique painting he once saw entitled Washing-Crossing the Delaware.

Mrs. Bleu enters from stage right, bearing four bottles of beer. She hands one to Ralph, one to Starfinder and one to Mr. Bleu; then, retaining the fourth, she sits down on the sofa next to Ralph. All this while, Ciely has been standing off to one side. She looks first at her father, then at her mother; but neither seems to be aware of her. At length, she picks up her suitcase, which Starfinder has set down beside the settee, and disappears upstairs.

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Starfinder is about to ask Mrs. Bleu for a glass when he sees that she, her husband and Ralph are drinking directly from their bottles. Remembering his faux pas *of a few minutes ago, he hastily follows suit. Ever since he sat down, he has been waiting for someone to remark on the 2-omicron-vii scar on his cheek. Finally Mr. Bleu does so.*

MR. BLEU: That's a nasty looking scar you've got there, Uncle John. Knife wound?

STARFINDER: I was burned and blinded years ago when I was a cabin boy on a whaleship that hadn't been deganglioned properly. I guess you could call the scar a sort of souvenir.

MR. BLEU: You can't trust those damned whaleships, I always say. You don't see many of them around these parts. All they're good for is freighters, anyway. You take an eelship now. They make good passenger ships and good, practical freighters too, and they're safe. I know. I work in the yards. Been there seventeen years — ever since I got my working papers and joined the union.

RALPH (*to Starfinder*): How come you're captain of a whaleship instead of an eelship? Seems to me a good, loyal Renascence citizen ought to stick to products made on his own planet, not somebody elses'.

STARFINDER: Originally I'm from whaleship country. From Terraltair — Altair IV.

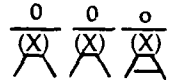
RALPH: But Altair IV's halfway across the galaxy. It'd take more years than you are old for you to get here.

STARFINDER: My whaleship's a special one. It exceeds standard ftl velocity.

RALPH: Is that so?

STARFINDER: Yes.

Ralph makes a rat-a-tat-tat with his empty bottle on the coffee table, and Mrs. Bleu jumps up, dashes into the kitchen and returns with four full ones. Ciely has come back downstairs and now begins collecting the empties.

THE WHALE: 

STARFINDER: *Never mind, whale.*

MR. BLEU *(after a mild eructation)*: I know it's prob'ly none of my business, Uncle John, but that eelship of yours that you accidentally rammed with your whale when you went after that feather-brained dotter of mine must have set you back quite a bundle. Just how big a bundle, if I may be so bold as to ast?

STARFINDER: $10,000,000,000, or thereabouts.

MR. BLEU (*in an awed voice*): $10,000,000,000!

RALPH (*in an equally awed voice*): $10,000,000,000!

MRS. BLEU: Was it insured?

STARFINDER: Naturally.

MRS. BLEU: Are they going to pay off?

STARFINDER: I doubt it. It'll probably be classified as an "Act of God."

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MR. BLEU: $10,000,000,000. Down the drain!

STARFINDER *(blandly)*: What's $10,000,000,000?

RALPH: Dirty capitalist pig! *(To Mrs. Bleu)*: Get me another beer, Mildred. *(Mrs. Bleu heads for the kitchen again.)*

STARFINDER *(calling after her)*: Skip me this time, ma'am.

RALPH: Too good to drink with us common ordinary working-class people, huh, Starfinder?

CIELY (again collecting the empties): He's certainly too good to drink with a free-loading klutz like you. You aren't fit to shine his shoes!

MR. BLEU: Ciely!

MRS. BLEU *(returning with three full ones)*: Apologize to our guest this minute, you bitchy little brat!

CIELY: He's your guest, not mine. *(Runs outside.)*

MRS. BLEU *(sitting back down on the sofa)*: I don't know what we're going to do with her. I just don't.

RALPH *(putting his booted feet on the coffee table and leaning back to a more comfortable position)*: I know what *I'd* do with her!

MR. BLEU: And she'd have it coming too.

MRS. BLEU: We've tried everything. Cutting off her allowance. Locking her in her room. Washing her mouth out with soap. But she goes right on being just as snotty as ever, and keeps right on reading those buks.

STARFINDER: Buks?

MRS. BLEU: You know — those make-up things with words.

STARFINDER: But isn't she taught out of books at school?

MRS. BLEU: You're talking about *text*buks. I'm talking about buks. Like you get from the underground liberry.

MR. BLEU: Mildred, I think Ralph's bottle is empty. While you're at it, bring me another one. And bring Uncle John another one too.

STARFINDER: Skip me again, ma'am.

RALPH: Dirty capitalist pig!

STARFINDER: I think I'll get some air.

Outside in the bright morning sunlight, he wipes his forehead with the regulation handkerchief that came with the uniform and puts his captain's hat back on. He takes a deep breath. In another minute he'd have —

Best to forget about it.

He looks up and down the block. Ciely is nowhere in sight.

Some distance down the street there is an eruption of verdure that indicates a park. Perhaps she is there.

He finds her sitting on a green bench that girds a spreading shade tree. She has a small branch in her hand and is tracing evanescent patterns on the grass. In her azure dress, she looks like a piece of the sky that has broken free and drifted down to the ground.

He crunches along a pebbled path

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and seats himself beside her. He sits there dumbly, not knowing what to say. For a long while, Ciely doesn't say anything either. Then, not looking at him, she asks, "What did you think of my devoted parents, Starfinder?"

"Cynicism doesn't become you, Ciely."

"I know it doesn't. And evasiveness doesn't become you."

He takes refuge behind a scholarly approach. "The major components of any given culture have a tendency to think alike and to behave alike and to glorify their own ignorance. Nevertheless, such people form the foundation of all stable societies. Without them, there wouldn't be civilizations."

"But you don't understand, Starfinder. You made all that money while everybody else was trudging along the highway toward economic security, and you still don't understand." She is looking at him now. Earnestly. "If the *haute bourgeoisie* were just the foundation, it would be all right. But they're the walls and the floor and the roof, too. Their unions are so powerful that whatever they say, goes. It's like serfs taking over a fiefdom and remaining serfs; like muzhiks taking over a landowner's estate and remaining muzhiks; like sailors taking over a ship and remaining sailors."

"If they didn't remain sailors, the ship might sink."

"It would be better if it did."

Starfinder sighs. "I don't think we're getting anywhere, Ciely."

She nods. Sadly. "I know. Anyway, we're talking about tomatoes when the subject is really potatoes."

"I've deeded my house in the country to your parents, with the proviso that they bequeath it to you. I've also established a trust fund for you, with no strings attached, so that when you come of age you can do anything you want, *'haute bourgeoisie'* or no *'haute bourgeoisie.'* You can even write poetry, if that happens to be your bent. My lawyer has instructions to sell both my limousines and to deposit the money, less his commission of course, in a bank account in your name."

She has resumed tracing evanescent patterns in the grass. He waits for her to say something, but the silence is broken only by the shrill voice of a mother sitting on a nearby bench, reprimanding one of her children.

There is a gnawing ache at the base of his sternum that has all the earmarks of a duodenal ulcer, but which is nothing of the sort. Once again, he assumes a scholarly air. "Given a democracy, Ciely, sooner or later there's bound to be an establishment, and inevitably its values are going to flavor the societal soup. Renascence's establishment is comprised of workingmen; but, believe me, if it were comprised of businessmen, it wouldn't be any better; and if it were comprised of intellectuals, it would probably be worse." His words sound empty, even to him.

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"You're still talking about tomatoes, Uncle John." She throws away her branch and gets to her feet. "I think it will be best if we go back now. My mother and father are probably worried about where I am. As you probably noticed, I'm uppermost in their minds, morning, noon and night."

They leave the park and walk up the street of squarish houses, side by side but parsecs apart. They come to a halt by the little walk that leads up to the Bleus' front porch. In a Andromedae's morning light, the flowerbed in the front yard is a multicolored glory to behold. There is one exactly like it next door. In fact, there is one exactly like it in every front yard on the block.

"Are you coming in, Uncle John?"

Starfinder shakes his head. "It would serve no useful purpose. Say good-by to your folks for me, and tell Ralph I'm ready to leave."

"Very well."

She stands staunchly before him, looking at last into his eyes. She is not nearly as thin now as she was when he first saw her in the boatbay of the eel, nor nearly as frail. And yet she seems to sway slightly in the morning breeze. "Good-by, Uncle John. Tell Charles I'll say good-by to him later."

"All right."

And then, without warning, she is in his arms, sobbing. "Oh, Starfinder, I've been so mean, and I didn't want to be — honest! I know you had to bring me home, I know you can't afford to saddle yourself with a twelve-year-old misfit like me, and I don't blame you in the least. I know all you did for me and I know I can never repay you in a thousand years, I know, I know, I I know, and, oh, Starfinder, I love you, you and Charles, and please, when I'm grown up, come back for me!"

She turns, runs quickly up the walk, climbs the porch steps and disappears into the house. Starfinder's "duodenal ulcer" takes a turn for the worse. In fact, it nearly doubles him over. Along the periphery of his vision he sees fields and trees and little hills clad with green and growing grass, and then, subtly, the fields fade away, and the hills and the trees, and the grass pales and vanishes, and all that is left is bleak and barren earth.

Ralph comes out of the house, descends the porch steps, staggers a little as he crosses the lawn, and starts to climb behind the wheel of the limousine. Starfinder taps him on the shoulder. "You're too drunk to drive, Ralph," he says. Ralph turns around, regards him blearily. "Nobody gets drunk on beer. Beer ish the moderage of beveration." "I don't like drunks," Starfinder says. "I especially don't like beer drunks. They're hypocrites, slobs and loud-mouths." "Dirty capitalist pig!" Ralph shouts and makes a wild swing in Starfinder's general direction. Starfinder turns him around, propels

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him across the lawn, boots him in the buttocks and sends him sprawling face-down in the Bleus' flowerbed. Then Starfinder returns to the limousine, gets behind the wheel, backs out of the driveway and heads for his house in the country, where he will spend the rest of the day winding up his affairs.

He feels a little better, but not much.

De-orbit, whale, Starfinder commands, standing on the bridge. *Dive back into the past.*

The whale does not respond.

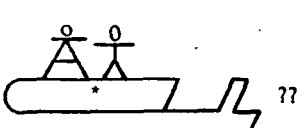
Clearly, it is dozing and has failed to "hear" his command.

De-orbit whale, he "says" again, doubling the mental voltage of the telepathic command. *Dive back into the past!*

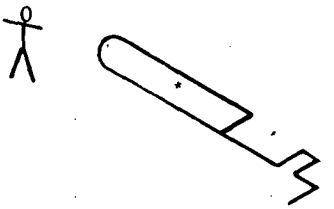
The whale does not budge.

Starfinder is about to repeat the command again when a hieroglyph appears in his mind:

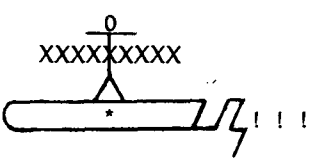
You know perfectly well where she is, whale. She's on Renascence. Now de-orbit and stop playing games!



That's all behind us now, whale. Now, it's just you and me. Two comrades instead of three. De-orbit!



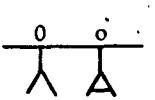
You can't leave me in the lurch, whale! Remember our pact!



Damn it, whale! Do you want me to kidnap her?

Silence.

Even if I dared, she needs more than just a father. She needs a mother, too.



Starfinder throws his captain's hat on the deck. Not only is he furious, his "duodenal ulcer" is killing him. *All right, whale, this is the end! It so happens that I have a house in the country down below and that I happen to own stock in half the major corporations on Renascence and....* And then he remembers that he deeded his house in the country to the Bleus and that he li-

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quidated all his stock to buy the star eel and to establish a trust fund for Ciely and that he is as poor as he was before he went past-backing — to wit, as a churchmouse.

Moreover, without the whale's co-operation, he can't amass another fortune.

Would he if he could?

— Would he, if he could, buy another house in the country and settle down for the rest of his life among the *"haute bourgeoisie"*?

He would sooner settle down among the Great Apes of Tau Ceti III.

Ciely has no option. At least not until she comes of age.

By then, it may be too late. By then, she may very well be a Great Ape herself.

It is true that her parents aren't really Great Apes. But they might just as well be.

Why did he blind himself to the glaring truth? Why did he refuse to face the inexorable fact that they do not give a damn about her, never have and never will?

Because the alternative was kidnapping her?

Hardly. He already has two crimes lying on his doorstep. There is sufficient room for one more.

Because there isn't enough room for two people in the whale?

Hardly. There is enough room in the whale for a whole girl's school.

Because living in the whale, in space, in time, would deprive Ciely of a proper education?

Hardly. Not with the entire past, with its wealth of music, paintings, sculptures, literature, drama, philosophy, and science, at her very fingertips.

Because she would be deprived of the company of young people?

Hardly. He could set up housekeeping in a place-time of her choice, and she could attend school and become part of a peer group and remain a part for as long as she chose. All he would need would be money, and with the whale's co-operation he could amass another fortune any time, anywhen.

A panorama of what he and the whale can do for her appears before his eyes, dazzling him. It has been there all along, but up till now he has refused to look at it.

Why?

Why did he pretend it wasn't there? Why did he pretend that in stranding Ciely among the *"haute bourgeoisie"* he was acting in her own best interests?

The answer, when it comes, punctures his ego like a pin piercing a balloon.

He acted as he did because he knew that the freedom he stole when he stole the whale was in jeopardy. Because, whenever he balanced that freedom against the love of a little girl, he always put his thumb on the scales. Free, unfettered, he was afraid to cross his Red Sea, his Hellespont, his Alps, his Rubicon, his Atlantic and his

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Isthmus.

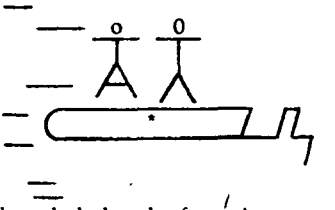
Well, he is afraid no more.

***

He lands the lifeboat in the Bleus' front yard, knocking down the pretentious cast-aluminum sign and demolishing the rest of the flowerbed. He pounds on the front door so hard he nearly knocks the house down, and when a startled Mrs. Bleu opens it, he rushes through the living room and pounds up the stairs. He finds Ciely's room without difficulty. She is fast asleep on her narrow bed. Her pillow is wet with tears. He picks her up, grabs an armful of dresses out of a nearby closet and carries her in her nightclothes back down the stairs and through the living room and out onto the porch and down the steps and across the ruined flowerbed to the lifeboat. Behind him, a half-awake Mr. Bleu bellows, "Bring back my dotter, you space-bum you!" "Kidnapper!" screams Mrs. Bleu. Somehow, they sound like actors in a play.

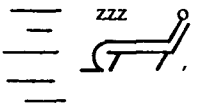
Starfinder lofts the lifeboat. Miraculously, his "duodenal ulcer" has healed. Ciely doesn't come fully awake till they are halfway to heaven. "Starfinder, you came back!" Presently the whale shows above them, a gigantic silhouette against the stars. Starfinder docks the boat and they make their way together to the bridge. Now *will you de-orbit, whale?* Now *will you dive?*

There is a great crepitation as 2-omicron-vii energy fills the drive tissue. A faint creaking of bulkheads as the whale girds itself for the de-orbital thrust. And a rebus thrown in for good measure:



The whale breaks free. A moment later, it dives.

"I think," says Starfinder, *pere et mere,* leading the way to the lounge, "that we might have a glass of orange pop before we turn in. And maybe look in on 'Ba' and see how she's doing with her *Sonnets* these fine days."



"observes" the whale.

"Oh, *you!*" says Ciely Bleu.

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This story left us speechless, unable even to summon up words with which to reject it. Please forgive.

The One-Eyed Moth B Longs To Sum Buddy Else

BY

CHARLES E. FRITCH

Until he met the one-eyed moth, Buddy Else's life was boring, humdrum, dull, uneventful, fraught with disillusionment and despair, unprofitable, insecure, loveless, and altogether not very satisfying.

"Life," he was fond of telling bartenders, "is a bowl of horse manure."

He was thirty-five years old, twice-married and twice-divorced. He was an ugly man, with a crooked nose, crooked teeth, and a crooked disposition. He worked as a shoe salesman, lived alone in a dingy apartment, and didn't like who he was, where he was, or what he was doing.

During the daytime he fondled the sweaty feet of powder-soaked women and stared lustfully at their lumpy legs. In the evening he snatched purses from wrinkled old ladies and stole sightless pedlars blinder than they were. At night he slept the restless, dream-infested slumber of a dissatisfied man who knew he had better things to do with his life — if only he had a break.

One thing was certain: no matter how broke he was, no matter how fickly fingered he was, no matter how down and out and depressed and bitter he was — he wasn't going to take any crap from anybody.

Sometimes, to bolster his sagging spirits, he threw open the window of his dingy apartment overlooking the busy industrial street and shouted out to the world: "Hey, world, this is Buddy Else speaking. I don't take any crap from anybody, ya hear me?"

The world never replied, but it made Buddy feel a little better for having told it off. This oasis of pleasure in his desert existence did not make him feel better for long.

Buddy Else was unhappy. He wanted more than he had. Much, much more. He wanted Security. Sex. Money.

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"If only," he muttered to the Cruel Fates, "I had a chance to change my way of living."

The Cruel Fates apparently had more important things to consider than the pitiful voice whining in their direction, for they continued to ignore him.

"*I'll* give you a chance," said the one-eyed moth, shimmering iridescently through the fly-specked apartment wall on rainbow wings.

Buddy was so startled he toppled from the rickety chair on which he'd been perched guzzling a can of cheap beer. From his new vantage point on the floor, he contemplated the creature which now seemed even taller than its seven-foot height.

Despite the fear frosting his spine, he managed to croak, "What the shit are you?"

"I am," the one-eyed moth announced proudly, "exactly what I appear to be — a one-eyed moth."

Buddy was no expert on moths, although tribes of the smaller varieties had often feasted on his meager wardrobe, but the beast did seem to be what it said it was. One of the one-eyed moth's eyelids was tightly shut, but the other was wide open, revealing a huge round eye that was the blackest black imaginable except for interior highlights that sparkled like atoms exploding in all colors of the spectrum.

"Did you know," the one-eyed moth went on profoundly, "that the true value of a man is often more or less than the sum of his parts?"

"I never gave it much thought," Buddy admitted, slinking upward from the floor into his rickety chair. "What has this got to do with me?"

"Your name is Buddy Else?"

Buddy hesitated, wondering for a fleeting moment if the moth were a cop in disguise. Not likely. He nodded.

"Is there any other Buddy Else?"

"There's no Buddy Else but me, I'm sure of it."

"Then you're the one," the moth elated, and the dancing light-patterns in his good eye seemed to burst with renewed vigor. "By the way, my name is B."

"Bee — as in bumble?"

"B — as in the second letter of the alphabet."

"What happened to A?"

"You've heard the story of the moth and the flame?"

Buddy thought a moment. "No, I don't think I have."

"A was badly burned by a flame."

Buddy grunted sympathetically. "Yeah, some of those dames can really give a guy a hard time."

"I imagine," the one-eyed moth said, getting right down to business, "that you're wondering why I'm here."

A terrible thought crossed Buddy's suspicious mind. "You're not here to harm me, are you?" He wasn't going to take any crap from anybody, and that included a giant, one-eyed, talking moth.

"No, Buddy Else, I'm here to help you."

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"Help me?"

"Nobody else," the moth assured him.

"I *could* use some help," Buddy said, glancing around the depressingly dirty apartment. "Do you do windows?"

"I do something better than windows," the moth said. "I furnish doors."

"No shit," Buddy murmured, suddenly awed.

"Come close, Buddy," the moth said, "and look deep in my good eye."

It opened its good eye wider than ever, an act which seemed to close its bad eye all the tighter. Buddy stared into its depths, into a deep deeper than all of space and all of time, so deep it seemed to him that if he wanted to he could crawl right into that huge unblinking eye.

"Go on," the one-eyed moth urged him. "You'll find another, a better world."

Buddy Else could use another, a better world. The one he was in now stank. He had to admit it (but only to himself and even then silently in case someone might be eavesdropping) that it was his own fault partly. He'd schemed and connived all his life, and apparently crime — at least the two-bit kind — didn't pay, because here he was living the life he was living, lonely, broke, eating TV dinners when he didn't even have a TV.

Another world would have to be an improvement.

So Buddy crawled into the eye.

It wasn't easy. There seemed to be a wind blowing against him, trying to keep him out. But he persisted, and he found himself inside a dark tunnel, with sides soft and comfortable feeling and the floor sturdy enough to support his weight. He was surprised he could stand, but there was all the room he needed and more. The sparkling lights were there ahead of him, splashing brilliant-colored fireworks to lead him in the right direction — toward a bright circle of light in the distance.

He paused for the briefest moment to look back for the reassuring circle of light behind him. He'd felt a momentary surge of insecurity that had its roots in his mother's insistence in toilet training him at too early an age. But his dingy, familiar apartment was there, waiting for him if he wanted to return.

But right now, consumed with curiosity and hope, he girded his mental loins and hurried on.

It was like coming out of a very dark cave into sunshine. Shading his eyes, he crunched onto the sandy beach. The warm orange sun exploded warmth from a blue, blue sky. Palm trees nodded welcome in a mild tropical breeze. A shining ocean stretched in all directions around him.

It was obviously the one-eyed moth's notion of what Paradise would be for a human.

"Not bad," Buddy muttered, "but where are the people?"

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Then he saw the castle.

It was on a hill overlooking the sandy beach and the fresh-smelling ocean. Music and laughter bubbled from it, along with the sense-intoxicating odors of exotic foods and drink. His mouth watering, Buddy ran as fast as he could up the incline to the open gate and into the courtyard. Out of breath, he paused to wipe his sweaty brow with a shirtsleeve. Instantly, soft rains fell from cloudless skies, cooling him, soothing him, invigorating him.

He began laughing and crying at the same time. The one-eyed moth was right: this was a nice world. It was a world where a down-and-out, thirty-five-year-old shoe salesman who hated his life could find another chance.

And the world got better.

For inside the castle were beautiful women dressed the way beautiful women were dressed in Buddy's night- and day-dreams — and they were just as eager to please him in real life as they were in his nocturnal and matinee fantasies.

Time flew by on silent moth wings. Buddy didn't know or care how long he stayed in the castle. It might have been minutes, or hours, or days. Time seemed to stand still, and yet it also seemed to go on forever. He ate and he drank and he made love. He had all the pleasures a man could want.

Except money.

Sure, it was a wonderful life, but he was still broke. What about the future? He ought to have a little nest egg socked away for his old age.

The girls didn't know what money was.

"Well, do you have any gold or diamonds?" Buddy persisted hopefully.

They did not.

"What kind of a shitty world is this without any money to spend?" he wanted to know. "Besides, what kind of a crappy world is this where there's nothing to spend money on?"

The girls didn't know what he was talking about. They wanted to kiss him and fondle him and do all those things uninhibited women crave to do to a man whom they, for some inexplicable reason, love more than anything in the world.

Which is what gave Buddy his great money-making idea.

He would go into the travel business, he decided, chuckling. For a hundred dollars he'd take a customer into the one-eyed moth's good eye to the island and let the man inundate himself in a tidal wave of female beauties in the castle. There were enough girls to service a dozen customers at once. Even if he had only one tour a day, twelve hundred bucks wasn't a bad chunk of dough for an easy day's work. Multiply that by five, and the take came to six thousand a week, with Saturdays and Sundays off for going to the races and other similar exotic places where rich men went to relax.

Not bad for a purse-snatching shoe salesman.

The wind's suddenly mournful sigh

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through the palm trees reminded him of the breathing of a thoughtful moth.

Naturally, he decided reluctantly, he'd have to cut the one-eyed moth in on the deal.

Unless the one-eyed moth didn't want any part of it — in which case, Buddy would simply have to chain the creature to his radiator, cut it off without a percentage of any sort, and force it to cooperate. He felt in his pocket to fondle the metal weapon that would make the moth do anything Buddy wanted it to do.

"I'm not taking any crap from anybody," Buddy reminded himself — and that included one-eyed moths!

"I'll be back," he announced to the harem of disappointed females.

He hurried across the courtyard and through the open gate and over the sand to the cave that led to the tunnel through the good eye of the one-eyed moth. When he popped out of the one-eyed moth's one good eye into his apartment, Buddy found the one-eyed moth standing just as he'd left it.

"Did you have a nice time?" the one-eyed moth inquired politely.

"Not bad, not bad," Buddy admitted. "But listen, moth, I've got a business proposition for you." He told the patiently listening moth his plan for taking paying visitors for a tour of the island, the castle, and the lovely half-naked girls and added, "Your take will be a big ten percent."

"No," said the one-eyed moth firmly.

Buddy sighed. "You drive a hard bargain, moth. I'll give you fifteen."

"Never!"

"Twenty, then."

"Not a chance!"

"It's eating into my overhead," Buddy said with growing exasperation, "but twenty-five is my last offer."

"Forget it," the moth advised.

Buddy was getting pissed off, and he was not about to take the moth's advice. The one-eyed moth was obviously trying to renege on its promise to help him, and, as usual, Buddy was determined not to take any crap from anybody.

"There's something else," Buddy said, voicing a thought that had been lurking in the dim recesses of his mind. "I don't believe that shit about your other eye being bad. I think you're holding out on me."

"My other eye is bad," the moth insisted. "My other eye is very bad."

Buddy was sure of it now. The moth was keeping the other eye to itself. "Open it up," he demanded. "I want to see it."

"No."

Buddy snapped the cigarette lighter from his pocket and pointed a finger of flame at the moth. The moth moved back quickly, but Buddy cornered it.

"I can set you on fire before you can get through that wall," Buddy warned. "Open the eye."

The moth sighed defeat. The eyelid covering the bad eye flipped open. At the same time, the eyelid covering the

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good eye flipped shut. The bad eye was brown and green and ugly, and there seemed to be a suction pulling with a force that grew stronger with each passing millisecond.

Woosh! Before he could brace himself, Buddy was pulled head-first into the bad eye. Clump! The bad eyelid closed behind him.

He was unhurt, but the darkness around him was complete and the air smelled funny. He rose unsteadily to his feet on the soft, mushy substance beneath him and hammered against the closed eyelid and demanded the moth open up. But like the Cruel Fates, the one-eyed moth ignored him.

Buddy shook his fist. "I'll getcha for this, moth. I'm not taking any crap from anybody."

As his eyes got used to the gloom, Buddy noticed a tiny circle of light at the far end of the corridor. Determinedly, he march-wallowed toward it. It was something like coming out of a dark cave into sunshine. But not quite like that either, for the sun was barely visible through the cloud-brown sky. A disagreeable stench came from the urine-colored ocean. Fighting panic, he ran toward the castle on the hill, ignoring the tiny sharp grey beach rocks, which hurt his feet even through the soles of his worn shoes.

The castle gate was closed. As he hammered on it, screaming to be let in, he heard clanking sounds and groans and moans and screams of pain from within — and suddenly he wasn't at all sure he wanted to be let in.

Buddy sank dejectedly to the ground. He'd done it again. "Help me," he cried to the Cruel Fates, but of course the Cruel Fates ignored him. He knew the one-eyed moth wouldn't ignore him. The one-eyed moth was going to keep him in this terrible place forever and ever.

The one-eyed moth's bad eye was not merely bad; it was worse: it was *evil!*

"I ain't taking crap from anybody," Buddy whimpered to himself.

He learned how wrong he was when he heard a thundering rumble that sounded like a moth farting — and turds brindled from the endless brown sky.

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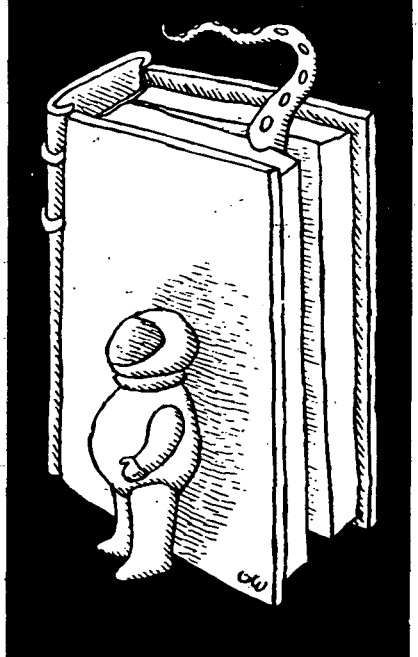
Books

MICHAEL BISHOP



Bander Snatch by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr., Bantam, $1.95

Hot Sleep by Orson Scott Card, Baronet, $5.95.

Hegira by Greg Bear, Dell, $1.75.

The Doppelgänger Gambit by Lee Killough, Del Rey, $1.95.

Juniper Time by Kate Wilhelm, Harper & Row, $10.95

A first novel is a treacherous hurdle in the career of a writer. To the novice, even tentatively approaching that hurdle can seem a presumptuous enterprise. It's a little like declaring to the world that you intend to leap a caravan of Rolls Royces on the baroque, build-it-yourself motorcycle you've been inexpertly assembling in your own basement. Presumptuous. Only dimly aware that most such literary leaps go completely unnoticed, you envision an all-or-nothing reward. Success means riches and adulation; failure, if it doesn't put an outright end to your daredeviltry, almost certainly ensures both ridicule and bruises.

Fortunately, once having leaped, most first novelists find that even if they have landed on wobbly wheels or gone hurtling handlebars-over-brains off the down ramp, the experience has proven not only survivable but instructive. Careers are seldom made or unmade by one impetuous leap. A dazzlingly adroit first crossing may indeed signal the arrival of a wild new talent — but a crash at takeoff or a midair unseating doesn't necessarily spell irrevocable ruin. Which is why I'm pleased

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to be a writer in perpetual apprenticeship rather than another insane disciple of Evil Knievel's peculiar brand of madness.

Forgive me this extended metaphor. What I'm trying to point out is that three of the five novels under consideration here are by young first novelists who attempt this initial hurdle with widely varying degrees of success. Two, I think, crash embarrassingly short of the down ramp, while the third, alighting with good humor as well as grace, shows every promise of making even higher and more stunning leaps in the future. The last two books I want to examine are by writers who have already been in the competition a while; each demonstrates a mature professionalism, the one at the level of developing competence, the other at that of, yes, quiet genius. All five, however, seem to be people who are committed to writing as something more than a mere avocation, and from whom we are undoubtedly likely to hear again. I find this commitment heartening, even if I can't applaud every performance. In this business, as in most others, you leap at your own risk.

Kevin O'Donnell, Jr., debuts as a novelist with *Bander Snatch*. Bantam blurbs the eponymous narrator/protagonist of this earnest and well-intentioned, but relentlessly *dumb*, narrative as the "street-wise leader of a gang that speaks its own defiant, futuristic slang." One is inevitably led to expect, or at least to hope for, a cynical, apocalyptic saga on the order of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

Not surprisingly, O'Donnell isn't yet up to the comparison, nor is he responsible for Bantam's jacket copy. His "futuristic slang" is cold hash indeed. O'Donnell can summon only enough inventiveness to suggest "cough" as a synonym for "kill," "nova" as the 22nd Century's equivalent of either "bang-up" or "copacetic," and "Big Unk" as his scat-talking society's epithet for "Uncle Sam." Tedious. At one point he even has a secondary character explain to Bander Snatch the meaning of "buzzword," a present-day neologism which I hope is already on the road to extinction. If this is "futuristic slang," C3P0 took elocution lessons from Josh Billings.

O'Donnell fares little better attempting to stick to the rudiments of standard English: "Pounding feet and harsh pants seeped through the bewilderment that plugged my ears," he writes. Or: "Her impatience resented my interrupting her in the middle of arranging the party." And eloquence, blushing, altogether escapes his grasp: "In God's pointillistic vision, every dot impinges on its neighbors, filling, thrilling, willing the darkness begone."

Like many first novelists, O'Donnell has been seduced by the siren of first-person narration, perhaps because

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it seems to impart to his story an easy I-was-on-the-scene fluency and conviction. Here, however, this misstep is pretty much disastrous. Bander Snatch is presented without irony as a telepathic Robin Hood, a 22-year-old knight errant who can pokerfacedly refer to himself as "Jungle Lord" and "Candor." Never mind that the reader all too quickly comes to perceive him as a self-obsessed punk whose concepts of truth, justice, and the American Way appear to derive from the muddled internalization of three or four Mickey Spillane novels and the 1963 edition of the Boy Scout's Handbook. The self-congratulatory altruism of Bander Snatch is as cloying as a fudge prauline.

The second, or off-world, section of O'Donnell's novel is chiefly notable for an inadvertently hilarious scene in which an intelligent she-bear rapes the protagonist to demonstrate to her fellow, uh, Arkslsnaglians that Bander Snatch is not truly "human." (O'Donnell employs "human" to denote even his self-aware, uh, Arkslsnaglians, yet another cavalier crime against semantic precision.) This section also introduces us to Baby Bear, who is to Bander Snatch as Bullet is to Roy Rogers — with the unfortunate disadvantage of being both huge and nauseatingly cuddlesome to boot. The entire interlude on Arkslsnagl is a thematic and structural disaster, and the sections that bookend it are little better. You won't know whether to laugh or sleep.

On the basis of a plethora of short fiction published in *Analog* and elsewhere, Orson Scott Card won the 1978 John W. Campbell Award for "best new writer." This first novel, meretriciously packaged by Baronet, is a large-format paperback entitled *Hot Sleep*.

Baronet's accompanying publicity material bestows the 1978 Hugo Award for best short story, a laurel actually taken by Harlan Ellison's "Jeffty Is Five," on an unnamed work of Card's; in addition, a cover blurb identifies Card as a "Hugo-Award Winner." I don't know whether this bold revision of history derives from Baronet's conscious duplicity or its overzealousness on behalf of one of its own, but it bespeaks either contempt of the facts or a flimsy grasp of reality, and works directly counter to both the firm's and Card's true interests. Were I the author, I would resent this erronious touting at least as much as I do Gray Morrow's sublimely tacky cover illustration.*

**In Morrow's defense, the artist has done no more than render in gaudy comic-book style a sublimely tacky scene from the novel's first half.*

After composing this review, I discovered that Hot Sleep *also has a less expensive paperback edition from Ace. The cover copy stays closer to the facts than does Baronet's; and the artist, without seriously challenging Michelangelo or Monet, perhaps exceeds the standards of Marvel Comics. The texts of both editions are, I think, the same.*

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Hot Sleep is a weird, as well as a bad, book. The title comes from a physiological side-effect of the drug "somec," which all of Card's characters inexplicably crave as an open sesame to immortality — even though, rather than extending life, somec merely permits one to parcel out a normal life span over a period of centuries. A second unattractive attribute of the drug is that it deprives its users of their memories, a potentially ruinous inconvenience recently countered by, perhaps you've guessed it, "new braintaping techniques." Although the phrase "hot sleep" neatly subverts the old sf bromide "cold sleep," Card seems to relish nearly every other hoary convention of the field.

Like a brutally halved watermelon, *Hot Sleep* splits right down the middle. Both halves are pulpy and overripe. The first is a paranoiac van Vogtian melodrama — with alarming echoes of *Slan*, in particular — set primarily against a city-planet so reminiscent of Asimov's Trantor that, like Steve Brown in a recent issue of *Thrust*, I wonder if Card is "reinventing the wheel" in blithe and total ignorance of its preexistence. The second half of *Hot Sleep*, meanwhile, is a post-Edenic saga devoted to the struggle of a group of colonists, all beginning with tabula-rasa minds, to formulate new identities and establish a viable civilization on another world. A good old-fashioned space battle with an unnamed enemy has destroyed the somec-soused colonists' braintapes in transit, you see; as a consequence, under the hands-off tutelage of Jazz Worthing, telepath and starship captain, the world must begin anew.

Neither half works very well, but the second is the better. Here Card jettisons some of the cheap science-fictional baggage with which he has encumbered his story, stops writing egregious lines like "two blond, blue-eyed gorillas with cheerful smiles on the front of their microcephali," and concentrates on developing a few believable and occasionally poignant human interactions. Nevertheless, *Hot Sleep* suffers from muzzy religio-political parallels, ill-conceived character motivations, an almost willful refusal to evoke place or mood for the reader, and some shamefully awkward prose.

Card, I understand, has already written and sold two or three more science-fiction novels. His production of short fiction seems undiminished, and he has edited an anthology entitled *Dragon Tales*. It will be interesting to see if his whirlwind apprenticeship has taught him anything. On the evidence of *Hot Sleep* I would say that, in the interest of husbanding and developing his talent, he badly needs to slow down.

Greg Bear, a young California-based writer and illustrator, succeeds infinitely better than either O'Donnell or Card in achieving a respectable de-

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but. *Hegira* is a surprisingly accomplished book. It possesses, in addition to a trio of engaging and deftly distinguished central characters, the sort of haunting, otherworldly "local color" for which so many readers come to science fiction. That it took Bear nearly five years to find a publisher implies some dismaying things about the priorities of those who screen and critique book-length manuscripts by novices, and I congratulate Dell for not letting *Hegira* slip away.

Hegira is an immense, intrinsically puzzling world 249,000 kilometers across. The postage-stamp area to which Bear confines the action of the novel — if you view Hegira itself as an enormous, spherical envelope — is studded at 5,000-kilometer intervals with towering obelisks upon which First-born Humanity long ago inscribed the accumulated knowledge of its entire history. Bear's characters, members of the apparently indigenous "Second-born," undertake a quest to riddle both the mystery of their unorthodox world and the meaning of their own humble lives.

In an *F&SF* Books column not too long ago (January, 1979), John Clute implied that in sf quest tales, episodes frequently seem to accumulate like "rows of dominoes," presumably without any organic reason for lining up in the arbitrary ways they often do. Bear skirts the very real problem of random stacking by means of two basic, almost common-sensical tactics: He permits his protagonist, Kiril, to change as he and his companions proceed with their quest, and he sees to it that each ensuing adventure reveals another significant piece of the puzzle that is Hegira. Along the way, Bear, a budding sf local colorist, gives us not only human conflict but a few vivid evocations of this world's seascapes and countrysides. (Chapter 12 is an especially brilliant "travelogue" chapter.)

What most delights me about *Hegira* is that it seethes with interesting detail without boiling over into either hyperbole or illiteracy. Bear has the makings not only of a storyteller but of a stylist, and it goes without saying that the illusion created by a short story or a novel remains unburst longer if the reader doesn't continually run into syntactical gaffes and sudden, idiosyncratic shifts of tone. Bear already has a sure grasp of a writer's most basic tools, and that is something to celebrate in a first novelist. Here, for instance, he gives thematic import to a description of the sky:

> High clouds of ice crystals glowed overhead as the last daylight faded; herringbone, mare's tail, lacework, and fly's wing. To Kiril it looked sometimes as though cryptic messages were being written in the sky, almost decipherable.

Hegira is not without minor flaws. (Somebody once said that a novel is a long narrative with something wrong with it.) Two of Bear's characters make oddly abrupt, if carefully prefigured,

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exits from the story line; and the obligatory revelation/recognition scene skates by so quickly, in such a snowstorm of exposition, that the reader may feel a trifle razzle-dazzled by its passage. But Bear's ending is at once humorous and compassionate, and the power fantasy it appears to embody, *à* la the cliché-ridden epics of O'Donnell and Card, is in fact tinged with ambiguity. Bear is apparently aware that self-doubt is often as merciless a goad to achievement as is the desire for acclaim and authority. Interestingly, the character who survives the quest in *Hegira* began his career not as a barbarian soldier but as a scholar "scrittori."

Lee Killough's first novel was *A Voice out of Ramah*, which, unfortunately, I haven't read. *The Doppelgänger Gambit*, her second, shows her to be a conscientious crattswoman with a flair for creating, along with the stereotypical flotsam and jetsam of most police-procedural novels, a few memorable characters. Janna Brill, Killough's protagonist, and Mahlon "Mama" Maxwell, Brill's flamboyant (male) partner, provide at least as much reader interest as does their obstacle-strewn pursuit of the narrative's chess-obsessed bad guy.

Occasionally, in fact, *Gambit* read like an ornate sf transliteration of a *Columbo* episode, replete with stratagems, counterstratagems, self-destructive behavior on the part of minor villains, and coincidences galore, not the least of which is the availability of so many disenfranchised lookalikes for wealthy straights in a single metropolitan area. With only a few changes Killough might have cast her novel against a contemporary backdrop, sparing herself even the one sociological extrapolation — continuous economic surveillance of all but a few rebellious dropouts, adroitly dubbed "slighs" — that permits her story to work.

But, I confess, this objection is really pretty arbitrary. So slick is Killough's handling of her materials that even when her characters use "nova" to mean *exactly* what O'Donnell's characters mean by it, you *believe* you're eavesdropping on a bit of "futuristic slang." Don't ask me why. The only answer I can give you has to do with Killough's competence as a storyteller. A more tempting criticism of Killough — that she seems capable of exploiting the manifold possibilities of sf to much better advantage — is effectively defused by the fact that, this time out at least, she obviously didn't care to do anything but what she has done. In a thoroughly lackadaisical but very real way, I *enjoyed* Lee Killough's second novel. You probably will, too.

Finally, *Juniper Time* by Kate Wilhelm, a work of intricate and disquieting beauty by a writer whose eerie elevation of craft into art frequently

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seems but an instinctual reflex of her innate talent. I have no doubt, however, that it is the product of hard work, abetted by the author's insightful intelligence and her abiding dedication to writing well. Wilhelm's is a serene and powerful talent.

I pile up these superlatives in resigned awareness that not everyone is going to have his or her hinges blown off by *Juniper Time*. Wilhelm's novel unfolds at a leisurely pace, in a prose style muted toward the grand evocativeness of absolute silence. Wilhelm has never been one for flashbulbs or pyrotechnics, and, at a secure middle point of what I hope is going to be a *very* long career, she quite gratifyingly gives no sign of ever opting for their use. Further, to create psychological verisimilitude as well as to advance her story, Wilhelm crosscuts between her two principal characters — Jean Brighton, a research linguist, and Arthur Cluny, an astrophysicist, childhood friends and the offspring of fathers instrumental in establishing in earth orbit a controversial multinational space station — with the result that the narrative line unifying these separate sections is relatively slow to emerge. Nevertheless, tension builds inexorably, and the reader's sense that something important is in the works does not go unrequited. Finally, Wilhelm's portrait of tomorrow's United States is so devastatingly bleak, recalling the backgrounds of such classic Wilhelm fictions as "The Red Canary," "The Funeral," and even *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, that some readers may overlook the fact that her ending is upbeat and cathartic.

Let me reiterate: The accomplishment of *Juniper Time* is very real. It stands in stark and exemplary refutation of the debasement of taste that so often gives us adolescent power fantasies in the place of coherent adult visions. It does so by completely overstepping the most tenacious and annoying bugaboos of our genre: clumsy prose, threadbare plotting, comic-book characterization, flashy but fettered "imaginative leaps," the trivialization of both Space and Time, climactic instances of ersatz "transcendence," and out-and-out dumbness in the service of high and honorable ideals. *Juniper Time*, in short, is the kind of book toward which serious first, second, and even twelfth novelists either covertly or openly point their own careers. I unreservedly recommend it to Kevin O'Donnell, Jr., Orson Scott Card, Greg Bear, and Karen Lee Killough.

And, of course, to all of you reading this column.

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"We were wondering if you could drop by to make up an even thirteen!"

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This is Coleman Brax's first appearance in F&SF; we have another superior story from him in inventory and suspect that we will be seeing a lot of this new writer, who says that he "is thirty-six, a computer scientist by profession. I live with my wife and young son in suburban New York State."

Superflare

BY

COLEMAN BRAX

Nobody will ever tell you that Capstar was a good poker player. Erratic, yes. Lucky, yes. Pigheaded, yes. But never good.

I've seen him blow five hundred one night, win back a thousand the next. One month I tried to keep track of his ups and downs. I wasn't in every game, but I asked around and kept a little tally sheet. The guy was net ahead — net ahead by a sizable sum. That was when I began to wonder about him.

He never seemed unhappy when he lost. That bothered me. Sometimes I caught a hint of a smirk on his face as he tossed down his losing cards. And when he won, there was no elation. Everything matter-of-fact, scooping up the pot as if he knew all along it belonged to him.

The others were never suspicious. If they'd had an inkling of what he was up to, they'd have tossed him suitless through the airlock and gone back to the game as if nothing had happened. They were a rough bunch, with no tolerance for cheats.

There were a number of so-called accidents during my three-year stay on Luna. Most of them were over women, naturally. As chaplain, the problem of personal conflicts at the Base was often on my mind. Hoffman's suit thermostat, I was sure, had been tampered with. And someone had shut off the safety circuit on the tractor that crushed Santos. Murders, no doubt, with jealousy the cause.

So I had reason to be concerned about violence. With tempers short, Capstar was running a serious risk. But he played his game, alternating between folly and fortune, and the others didn't catch on. He must have thought he was a very clever guy.

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I make no claim for cleverness on my part. My name's Augustus Plylot; call me Auger. At home I'd been a full-time mechanic and a part-time preacher. I'd gained a reputation around Cleveland for keeping electric cars running. On Sundays I'd see a couple of dozen solemn faces show up at my weekly service. We met in the Community Room of the Hamskell National Bank.

I must admit that few of those faces ever looked familiar. People came once out of curiosity, rarely came back. My sermons about man's destiny in space didn't seem to inspire many of them. Genesis 22:17 — "I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore...." Clearly, there's not enough room on Earth for that to happen. The conclusion was evident, but few cared.

Finally, I decided that talking was not enough. I had to *do* something about it.

The Luna job was the first step; that's where I had to go. Build the mass driver to toss ore into L5 orbit so the colonies could be built. I'd read every one of O'Neill's books. As a kid, I'd had my bedroom papered with artists' conceptions of island interiors. You know — sweeping panoramas viewed from hillside terraces. Pure air. Fresh water. What I really wanted was to move into one of those pictures.

Unfortunately, the Base was nothing like my dreams. It was a mundane half-cylinder, buried under six feet of lunar soil. The inside was mostly unadorned aluminum. Fluorescent lights hung from bare chains, and underfoot was a corrugated floor. There were partitions here and there, and somebody had started a mural of space heroes, but all in all it was a bit bleak.

The work turned out to be interesting enough. Stikvoort and I had two types of vehicles to maintain. There were the rovers, descendants of the ones that Apollos rode in. Those were mainly for moving people around quickly. Then there were the tractors, multipurpose work machines that could be controlled remotely. They were for hauling equipment, digging, compacting soil, drilling holes. Complicated beasties. We got pretty good on them.

On Sunday mornings I held my usual ill-attended services. I tried to encompass the breadth of inclinations of the staff, but I never had great success at it. My biggest draw was the day I gave my Velikovsky sermon. Eighteen showed. Eighteen out of eighty-six. Other times I was lucky to draw seven.

Capstar was never one of them.

What can I tell you about Capstar? He never volunteered much about himself. I had to piece together facts picked up by people who had trained with or worked with him.

His appearance was not extraordinary. He had short blond hair, a fair complexion, a nose that bulged slightly towards the left side of his face. His skin had a weatherbeaten look that

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made it difficult to judge his age. I'd say he was about thirty-five when I met him.

He'd been in trouble as a boy. Kingsley wouldn't tell me how he'd found that out. Capstar had knifed someone to death, claimed it was self-defense. The other boy *had* had a gun, but it was still in his pocket when detectives searched the body.

Capstar got three years in a reformatory. He spent the time learning everything about electronics that the libraries and shops there could teach him. After that, he was able to earn a living maintaining industrial alarm systems — fire alarms, smoke alarms, gas detectors. And he was still eager to learn. He went to school nights and picked up an electrician's ticket.

Why did he choose Luna? The obvious reply is money. The pay was simply ten times better than what he could have earned at home. But that's less than half the answer. I think he was searching for something.

On Luna, his chief job was on the mass driver assembly. There were some three hundred sections, each with a capacitor bank that had to be wired into the main supply. It must have been monotonous work, but I never heard him complain about it.

Capstar generally kept to himself. When he wasn't playing cards or watching TV, you wouldn't see much of him. I only know of one time on Luna that he got involved with a woman.

Her name was Rossbov and she was a geologist up from Harvard for a six-month stay. Before Rossbov, Capstar had never shown an interest in any of the staff women. But when she appeared in the mess one day, he shoved people aside to sit next to her. I don't know what it was about her; she certainly was no dazzler.

Oh, she was pleasant when you got acquainted with her. And fascinating to listen to when she gave lectures. But she wasn't the type that a man would be attracted to just by looking. Short black hair, short broad nose, hardly any neck at all, and slightly overweight.

You might not think that someone with all her education would hit it off with Capstar, but she did. I saw them often, sitting alone at "their" corner table in the mess, talking in low voices. And also, I believe, they spent a lot of sack time together.

Rossbov was lucky, I must say, in her choice of timetable. While she was with us, she spent many hours far from the Base, digging up lunar materials. She'd have been out there when the superflare hit, and she wouldn't have had a chance.

But her tour had ended by then. She'd been gone over a month, and Capstar had just about gotten used to being alone again.

The superflare affected nearly everyone. Knocked out satellite communications for days, played havoc with some of the Eastern power grids.

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Normally, such events are predictable. It was one of the subjects that Rossbov had talked to us about.

There are orbital observatories constantly watching, feeding data into Earthside computers. They measure the sunspots as they grow, chart the X-ray flux, record the magnetic field gradients. Nine times out of ten, they give several hours warning.

An ordinary flare doesn't kill. You always wear a dosimeter, and if you get too big a dose, you take a shielded job for a while. That's not a big problem. It's the superflares, rare as they are, that cause the trouble. Earth has a fat atmospheric blanket for protection. On Luna, the X-rays get you first, then the cosmic rays run you through.

In most cases, you don't die right away.

We were about five E-days into the lunar day. We were working three shifts, trying to get as much done as possible before the two weeks of night.

Capstar and I and a dozen others had come off work and were catching the second quarter of the Superbowl Game. Samurai against the Patriots in the new Tokyo Stadium. Biggest live audience in the history of the game.

As usual, Capstar didn't seem to care much about the play. Sure, he had a bet down. But the details of the game didn't interest him. He just sat there wise-cracking and talking about the half-time show that was promised. I told him to keep quiet, elbowed him in the ribs. He laughed and started on another tasteless anecdote.

The Patriots scored and the cheers drowned out his punch line. Suddenly Capstar got very serious. I looked at him when I realized he hadn't said anything for five minutes. His face was strained, his eyes were wide and unfocused. For the first time I could remember, there was no hint of a smile on his lips.

"Cappy, are you all right?" I asked. "I didn't poke you too hard, did I?"

"Shut up," he said quickly. His face seemed one of a man in pain.

"You want to see the Doc? You don't look right?"

"Shut up," he said again.

The Samurai had moved the ball to the Patriots' twenty-yard line by then. I forgot about Capstar for a couple of minutes. When I looked for him again, he wasn't there.

I thought maybe he had gone to the Doc. The quarter ended and the half-time show began. I felt sorry for him then because he was missing a dilly. He really must have been sick.

Then the flare alarm wailed and everyone started shouting. We'd had no advance warning from the observatories. No advance warning, and there were at least twenty staff outside.

We raced to the control center, which was just a row of consoles at one end of the building. The signal had gone out automatically to the suit radios. So we knew that everyone would be scrambling to get inside. We could see on one screen the part of the

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mass driver that was currently being assembled. The twelve suited figures there had already tossed down their tools and were bounding towards the rovers. One moment there was a chaos of bodies, the next moment there were two loaded vehicles rushing out of the viewframe.

At the reactor site there was a brief delay. Someone had snagged a hose on a protruding beam. From the wild motions of the heavily padded arms, it appeared that the person was hysterical. Two cooler heads prevailed, however. The snagged one was freed and six more of our people headed for home.

"What about Yue and Costa?" asked one of the controllers. "They had a tractor out near the far end of the driver site."

The camera picked up the distant tractor, then zoomed in until the vehicle half-filled the screen. It was already in motion, with two white figures riding on top. But it was a slow machine, painfully slow compared with the rover. It was ironic that the two had gone out to start work on an emergency flare shelter.

The controller pulled back the view until the tractor was again a modest spot on the landscape. The ground in front of them had been packed and leveled in anticipation of construction, but that didn't help their speed much. They looked very small and very far away.

"Son of a bitch! Somebody's gone out to rescue them!"

A rover had just appeared on the scene, speeding towards the tractor. The vehicle was moving quickly, but not accurately. Its path meandered, crossing and recrossing the straight line that it should have been following. I realized then that it was a rover that had been brought to us for steering repairs. I had left it outside the vehicle bay, not far from the Base entrance.

"What's wrong with that critter?" somebody asked.

"Could be a dozen things. We haven't looked at it yet," I said.

We stood there, feeling helpless, as Yue and Costa jumped out of the tractor and bounded into the rover. The rover began its zig zag trek back towards us, careening often out of the packed area and kicking up clouds of dust. Whatever was wrong with the steering seemed to be getting worse.

They made it, though. It wasn't until they were almost at the airlock that someone thought to look at the rad meters.

"Normal? What the hell is going on?" Guida, the chief controller, suddenly started screaming at nobody in particular. "What's wrong with the goddamn system?" The flare alarm was a yes-no device that was solely to alert us to emergency conditions. The main panel, on the other hand, held meters that kept track of exact dosage levels outside. And those weren't showing anything dangerous.

Then the first bunch came in through the airlock. They were scared,

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rushing out of their suits, pulling out their tubular dosimeters and squinting at the readings. But the readings were turning out okay. The sense of relief spread quickly through the crowd of incomers. False alarm!

I saw Capstar enter and unsuit. It didn't cross my mind just then that he had driven the weaving rover.

In fact, nothing made sense until five minutes later when the gauges went wild. The warning from the observatories came about ten seconds after that. Superflare! Take cover! The rad readings blinked confirmation in brilliant red digits.

We stayed inside for three Earth days. After the X-rays came the cosmic rays, then the slower charged particles. It was unhealthy out there, damned unhealthy. So we lost that many hours of daylight, but not one staff member was hurt.

The flare alarm, by the way, never shut off. Not until someone fixed it, that is. Nothing, apparently, was wrong outside. It was a relay, inside, that was the cause of the problem. Someone had jammed it closed with a pencil point.

Few of us could have known which relay was which. Capstar, however, was familiar with alarm systems from his Earthside jobs. And he'd done some maintenance on the Base's systems as well. He knew. It had only taken him a few seconds to wield his pencil.

I'm not saying that I was the only one to figure this much out. There was no open investigation, however. And if anyone had suspicions, they kept them private. It's hard to accuse a hero of cheating at cards.

But something happened to Capstar after that. Maybe he was scared. All I know is that he began to lose more often than he won. He played the same kind of erratic game as ever, but he tipped the balance consistently the other way. There was no indication that he enjoyed the game any less than when he'd been winning. Perhaps his real enjoyment came from his sense of power.

He had three months left on Luna, and in that period he managed to even everything up. By the time he was ready to go, I don't think anybody was in the hole to him. He had a genuine look of relief on his face one night near the end when he put down his losing cards. I believe that that moment was when he finally felt safe.

Now I've heard talk about psi theories, but I know they're mostly speculation. People say that precog is impossible, or if it does exist it is hopelessly unreliable. I don't know how they can explain Capstar.

I tried to say something to him on the day he shipped out. There was something special about him, I said, something that was probably unique. He had a miraculous talent; a man shouldn't squander such a thing.

He just looked at me with his usual smirk and walked away without replying. I guess I felt I'd failed him. It pain-

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ed me to think of him drifting aimlessly, wasting his ability, maybe not using it at all.

The odd thing was that he hadn't really tried to cash in on it. He could have played the stock markets at home or bet the races. Instead he'd acquired skills, had worked for a living, had ultimately joined the Project. So I guess he was looking for something more than just a life of ease.

I've been back a year now, and I find my memories of the island pictures as enchanting as ever. I'll be working at the L5 site soon; I'm just finishing up my zero-gee training course. Capstar, I suspect, will not be joining us.

There was a piece about him on last night's news. He and his wife have set up a Disaster Warning Center. His wife, that's Professor Rossbov, lends scientific credibility, especially on the earthquake predictions. They have impressive databases and a network of computers. It seems they've been quite accurate so far.

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With all the millions of words written about science fiction in recent years, we have not seen one mention of Herman Melville, who is, of course, one of the great old-timers of sf. Mr. Kessel fills the lamentable gap with this insightful essay.

Herman Melville: Space Opera Virtuoso

BY
JOHN KESSEL

It was in 1928 that Hugo Gernsback, faced with the declining sales of his *Amazing Stories*, a magazine subsisting until then almost solely on reprints of Verne and Wells, was rescued from financial ruin by the appearance of a bright young star in the SF firmament: a twenty-six-year-old schoolteacher from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, named Herman Melville.

Modern readers of science fiction, accustomed to a fictional universe where Alpha Centauri is a next-door neighbor and the solar system itself is small potatoes, can little imagine the paucity of daring imagination and truly large objects exhibited by the SF of those early years, before Melville revealed new vistas beyond the Dog Star with his "Open Space" stories of the late twenties. Gernsback himself had reservations about Melville's early stories and their radical departure from the science of the times: they contained no patentable ideas. Melville, and the fans who eagerly accepted such pseudo-scientific concepts as the "motionless drive" and "planet staves" from early Melville yarns like "Galaxy Smashers" (*Amazing;* February, 1929), made Boston beans of Gernsback's misgivings — though some were to say that, in a queer un-American way, Gernsback resented Melville's imagination. Was this the cause of young "World-Delver" Melville's switch to the Clayton *Astounding* in 1933? Fans today still ponder this and the other conundrums that orbit around this SF pioneer.

The day he sat down to write that first story for *Amazing*, the fresh-faced Herman Melville had already accumulated a mother lode of experience, experience that seems to us, from the secure if uncomfortable vantage point of

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the Future, to be tailor-made to produce the prototype science fiction writer. Descended from a long line of wealthy Massachusetts mechanicians and job printers, the young Herman grew up in an atmosphere of ozone and printer's ink. Though his father died in the explosion of the West Newton gasworks in 1908, Herman blossomed under the tutelage of his Uncle Hiram, a cable splicer for the Edison laboratories in Menlo Park, New Jersey. We can envisage the boy's life as stimulating and informative, if a trifle too limiting for a child of Herman's dreamy nature. In public he was a sober youth, though we are told that he suffered from spells of enthusiasm. When the lad was just in his teens, the family fell upon hard times owing to financial reverses in the notorious direct-current speculations of World War I, and being the oldest of five children as well as the only son, much of the burden fell upon Herman's shoulders. At 19 he signed aboard the merchant ship *St. Lawrence*, and for the next five years crossed and recrossed the seas as an able-bodied machinist's mate, third class. In later years he was to tell of the importance of these experiences to his understanding of men and their technology: "A freighter's engine room was my M.I.T., my Bronx High School of Science." In the greasy realism of the space-tugs and warships of Melville's science fiction, we can smell more than a slight echo of the light that shone from the boilers of the *St. Lawrence*.

Faced with increasing debts arising from the burden of four unmarried sisters and an invalid mother, realizing that his position as a natural history teacher at the Pittsfield Normal School would never let him get ahead, Melville decided to try his hand at the writing of pulp fiction. We can be sure that he did not realize how nominal the financial return would be on such a career, in a field where even the highest paying magazines offered less than a cent a word. At the same time we can be grateful for this stupidity. Following the favorable reception of his first novelette for Gernsback (the rather travelogue-like "Typon: 3180"), Melville shrugged his shoulders and turned his sad and vulnerable gray eyes to the production of the star-spanning galactic adventures that the fans demanded, and that were to become his trademark. Such books as *White Rocket*, *The Martian Chronicles*, and *One Against the Universe* followed one upon the other in the early thirties. Honest tales of hard-working space heroes battling evil evils in the comfortable old future. Third-person narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends. Did he worry about the so-called "literary value" of his efforts? See the limit imposed by his workmanlike silence, by those same gray eyes, and know this answer: Who can say?

In September of 1928 the slender young author married Theodora K. Brown, the daughter of a prominent Boston judge, and the following year

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saw the birth of their first child, a girl, Ursula. Melville was never to become a practical man, but now, impelled by this new responsibility, he redoubled his efforts, and the stories that leapt from the frying pan of his typewriter to the fire of the SF pulps glittered with the creations of a penetrating, if somewhat disordered, imagination. It was here, as his popularity with the readers declined, that, paradoxically, the beginnings of the Melville "cult" emerged. Melville began his voluminous correspondence with both up-and-coming young writers and with several of the "old hands" who had responded to his new vision — no matter that in most cases they had failed to understand him at all. Among these correspondents are some of the great names of modern science fiction: Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Alfred Bester from the "new" group; Edmund Hamilton, M. M. Maamrath and Nathaniel Hawthorne from the "old."

Where once the acceptance came gratifying and easy; now, in the mid-thirties, the wells began to run dry. Caught in financial straits, burdened with a correspondence which at once both drained his energies and offered a hope of communication, beset with failing eyesight, Melville's work began to take on the characteristics of desperate search. In the morning he would rise in the early light of the Pittsfield farm, dress carelessly in trousers and a loose-fitting white shirt, and walk through the attic study, or about the yard, or from barn to fields, occasionally taking something up, some task either physical or mental, only to lay it down again presently, unsatisfied, unable to touch the things which fell within his grasp. Theodora worried for his health; she sought advice from relatives who had no sympathy; she sat alone in the large and drafty bedroom of the second floor and corrected the manuscript of the latest *Astounding* serial. She could see, through the window beside her, Herman as he knelt in the yard, picked up a clod of dirt, crumbled it in his hand, looking, looking, feebly with eyes and hands for the substance of it, the thing it was that made it a part of the earth, the solar system, the clusters of stars and galaxies spanned so easily in fictions, in single sentences and phrases, as, perhaps, even he might span a clod of dirt in pale, unworn fingers.

It was shortly after this period, in February of 1937, that *Astounding Science Fiction* published the first installment of Melville's immense five-part serial, *Starry Deeps, or The Wail.* This cosmos-encompassing novel, which I have shown in my book *Searchers of the Future* to be the first real science fiction epic, met with mixed reactions at the time. There were those who hailed it for its color, for the imaginative detail Melville leant to a story of the probe of the Independent Research Ship *Peascod* into the depths of the Coal Sack for the source of phenomena which might — or might not — threat-

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en the existence of all life on earth. Others were attracted (or repulsed) by the melodramatic Captain Ahab Habbison, one of the powerful "Sensemen," able through alien symbiosis to detect the forces that move behind the "pasteboard mask" of matter. But *The Wail* did not reach the average SF fan.

What these readers missed is what the true fan comes to Melville for today. Though this is a clumsy book, a primitive effort whose ranting characters and implausible action seem quaint to us now, it was still the first of the pulp stories to insert significant topical questions between episodes of exciting adventure. Take this often-misunderstood passage from Melville's description of the white cloud cover of the enemy world Shuddore in *The Wail:*

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all-color atheism from which we shrink?

Let's ignore the clumsy language and the wordiness through which we can see a writer paid by the word pathetically trying to bolster a faltering income. Fans of the thirties, thank god, weren't prissy about so-called "style!" What Melville is presenting here, in the guise of SF, is clearly an attack on Godless Leftists, "white supremacy," and the racial segregation he must have been aware of from his earliest days in the merchant marine. Such hard-hitting criticism of social problems predates Malzberg, Disch, and their gang of noisy pessimists by thirty years. If we read Melville carefully, with a wholesome American eye, we can see in his "obscurity" the foreshadowing of many social themes: the dangers of overpopulation, the takeover by big-time advertising, the potential disaster of widespread drug abuse, the necessity of sterilizing stray cats to curb the pet population.

Of course, we must admit that other parts of the tale are not so pleasant. These parts reveal the tragic flaw in Melville's psyche — his ceaseless pursuit of abstractions. Herman was not, I regret to say, a regular guy. In the course of *The Wail,* Meville gives full expression to the downbeat, meaningless questions which disturbed him and which confuse us: questions which were to occupy the remainder of his adult life, to his ultimate renunciation of fiction; questions of reality, of parallel universes; paranoid visions of possibilities stunted, of human potential unfulfilled, or man doomed, no matter what the change of circumstances — from past to present, from present to future, from world to total-

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ly new world — doomed to isolation and uncertainty. It is a story that is with us yet — the story of a man with great storytelling ability who throws away his chance to entertain.

And so we see that, though many of us have appreciated parts of *The Wail*, no one has swallowed it whole. This marked the end of Melville's most productive period, and though he produced a number of fine short stories in the decade following its publication, this novel just about finished his love affair with science fiction. At conventions of the 40's and 50's, and even into the dry 70's, we would see him: perhaps at a meet-the-authors party, where half the younger fen would wonder in total ignorance who the old, distant fellow was, or perhaps at the hotel bar, gently asking some stranger to join him over a glass of sherry. We could not know then, any more than we knew in the halcyon thirties, when his interstellar warriors plied the paper spaceways on quests, any more than we know now, now that he is gone from us — we could not know then or at any time what forces, thoughts, simple and unfulfilled loves lay behind the sad gray eyes. Had he been born a different man, in a different time, it might have been different. As it stands, we have what he wrote, and to hold it in our hands, to remember that there was such a man — this must suffice.

Important notice to all readers

Effective with our March 1980 issue, the new single copy price of F&SF will be $1.50; the new annual subscription rate will be $15.00. We raise these prices reluctantly, but we have not had an increase in two years, and we can no longer hold the line in the face of increases in our costs, particularly those from the U.S. Postal Service. The per piece charge for mailing a copy of F&SF has gone up 150% in the past two years! It now costs almost as much to mail an issue as it does for the printing, paper and binding combined!

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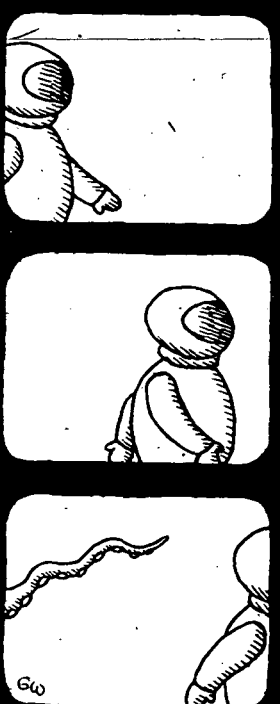
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



BLIGHTS OF ANGELS

All right, readers, last month we reviewed the Dracula film in its many incarnations. This month in honor of the holiday season we will do the same for angels, who have turned up in a surprising number of cinematic variations.

Angels in mythology were awe-inspiring terrible beings, akin to the winged, bull-bodied monsters of Assyrian theology. (For a sense of the power and beauty of angels as they should be, see C.S. Lewis's Perelandra trilogy or Tolkien's *Silmarillion.)*

But angels in contemporary mythology, i.e. the cinema, have for the most part been portrayed as meddlesome nitwits, whose tendency toward managing other people's business is matched only by their ignorance of human ways.

For instance, Cary Grant as the heavenly messenger in The Bishop's Wife comes to Earth to straighten out the affairs of an Anglican bishop, and almost ends up having one of his own with that worthy's wife. Henry Travers barely gets to terra firma in *It's A Wonderful Life* before falling into a river. (On purpose, of course, to save the life of Jimmy Stewart who is about to commit suicide. Unfortunately, considering the unpleasant stickiness of the rest of the plot, the angel succeeds.)

Jack Benny is sensationally funny in *The Horn Blows at Midnight* as the

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angel Athaniel, sent by the Powers that Be to blow the Last Trump. He saves the world by missing the deadline. But Mr. Jordan, of *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* and the remake, *Heaven Can Wait*, throws other people's souls into bodies like dirty sox into a drawer. In a sequel, the same Mr. Jordan creates havoc in a Broadway musical by introducing the goddess Terpsichore (talk about your fractured mythologies!) into the cast with her high-fallutin' ideas of Art.

Jeanette MacDonald was absolutely unearthly, as usual, as the bride in *I Married An Angel*, but not quite in the way she was supposed to be. Come to think of it, there are very few female angels depicted on film; since angels are supposedly asexual, it should be 50/50 (one is reminded of the classic schoolboy boner: "Geometry teaches us to bisex angels").

All in all, the image of angels on celluloid is far from dignified; "inane" is probably the best word. But given the success of *Heaven Can Wait* and *Mork and Mindy*, it was only a matter of time before a member of the heavenly host descended onto our TV sets. One of the first shows of the 1979/'80 season was *Out of the Blue*, with a guess-what as the hero.

I had made the Mork connection even before I found he was to introduce the angel into our mundane affairs. If a 'round-the-bend extraterrestrial is a hit, then certainly a zany angel (equally extraterrestrial in his way) has got to be, too.

Then you add a large family of "cute" kids (the Eight is Enough for the Waltons on the Big Prairie formula) for the angel to take care of — orphans, you know — and stir in a pinch of Mary Poppins, pull a large, black lady out of the Hattie McDaniel as housekeeper, and water down a Suzanne Pleshette look-alike as "Aunt Marion" for coy innuendo.

In the first episode, the angel Random (back to C.S. Lewis) is sent to our wicked world to shepherd this winsome crew (why didn't they call him Winsome instead of Random) by the wonderful Eileen Heckart, desperately trying to establish a character by watering flowers in a heavenly garden as the "Boss Angel."

Random has to get the room for rent in the orphans' home, so he does in a rival potential boarder by raising up a lot of train sound effects when the poor chap says he doesn't like noise, conjuring up a wind machine when he says he doesn't like drafts, and eventually forcing the harassed victim to make the horrid confession that (gasp!) he doesn't like kids. I'm on his side — these kids, in particular, are easy to hate.

Then the angelic Random makes Mork appear from nowhere to convince the kiddies that he really is an angel. They don't seem to recognise him — what's wrong with this bunch? Don't they watch television? Random, however, finds him side-splitting. Ap-

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parently they get ABC in Heaven.

I won't go into any more painful details. The rest of the hour-long first episode passed like days. The acting and direction is of the Robbie, the Robot, school — every line delivered straight forward and in as flat a monotone as possible. The writing is more of the Dick and Jane variety — make every point at least three times with no variation to be sure the 5-year-olds in the audience get it.

With *Out of the Blue*, the image of the angel has gone about as low as it can get — straight to Hell, in fact. The show may be off the air by the time this sees print; however, given the state of American television these days, that may well be too much to expect.

Things-to-come department ... It seems that Dino De Laurentis has taken over production of the so-far unfilmable *Dune*. Can there be any truth to the rumor that he is changing his name to Duno De Laurentis to publicize the project?

There are several approaches he could take, in fact. Do it as an animated feature and call it *Looney Dunes*. With a cast of rabbits — *Watership Dune*. As an operetta — *New Dune*. As a musical — *Brigadune* (with the hit song, "What is So Rare as a Day On Dune?". With a Scots flavor instead of Middle Eastern, and a female protagonist — *Lorna Dune*. Or Indian — *Gunga Dune*. (The preceding nonsense with thanks to Beth Meacham et al.)

Literary department ... I would like to note the recent publication, from Avon, of *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction* by Martin Last, Beth Meacham, Michael Franklin, and the author of this column.

Coming soon

Next month: the marvelous conclusion to **Robert Silverberg's** new novel, LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE.

March: BUOYANT ASCENT, a new sea-going sf adventure story by **Hilbert Schenck.**

Soon: New stories by **Marta Randall, Ron Goulart, Richard Cowper, Manly Wade Wellman, Tanith Lee,** a new "Stardust" story by **Stephen Tall, Stephen King, Walter Tevis, Thomas M. Disch** and many others.

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Readers who began the new Silverberg novel in the November or December issue are no doubt already into the exciting third part of LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE. If you did miss either of the first two parts, the author's synopsis will, we think, enable you to fully enjoy part three. However, we do have back issues of November and December available at $2.00 each.

Lord Valentine's

BY
ROBERT SILVERBERG

SYNOPSIS OF PARTS ONE AND TWO: The giant world of Majipoor, settled by colonists from earth in the early years of interstellar travel, is an airy and pleasing place, short of heavy elements and therefore having light gravitational pull despite its enormous mass. On its three enormous continents food is abundant, the environment is clean and beautiful, and a population of many billions lives peacefully. Though humans are the dominant stock, Majipoor is the home also of large numbers of six or seven of the galaxy's other intelligent species, as well as its own native race, the Metamorphs or Shapeshifters, now reduced to a minority and largely confined to a reservation.

This vast, wealthy, and diverse planet is governed by regional bureaucracies that owe allegiance to a pair of ruling figures: the Pontifex, an aloof and all but unknowable emperor who spends most of his time immured in a labyrinth on the continent of Alhanroel, and the Coronal, a younger and more active man, who is the chief executive officer of the realm and makes himself highly visible in constant tours of the world. Under a system thousands of years old, the Pontifex, upon succeeding to the throne, chooses a Coronal from a cadre of carefully trained princes; the Coronal is regarded as the adoptive son of the Pontifex, and will succeed him at his death. The Coronal's seat of power is an age-old

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Castle

castle of almost incomprehensible size atop Castle Mount, a thirty-mile high outcropping in Alhanroel, where an atmosphere habitable by humans is maintained by artificial means.

The chief spiritual figure of the realm is the Lady of the Isle of Sleep, mother of the Coronal and high priestess. From her sanctuary on the Isle, midway between the continents of Alhanroel and Zimroel, she and her millions of acolytes employ telepathic transmitters to appear in dreams to the inhabitants, offering guidance, consolation, and gentle direction. Her darker counterpart is the King of Dreams, who rules from the wasteland southern continent of Suvrael: using thought-amplifying equipment far more potent than the Lady's, the King sends troublesome and disturbing visions to sleepers, and is capable of punishing transgressors against the law by afflicting them with intollerable nightmares. The office of King of Dreams is hereditary and has remained in the family of the Barjazids since its establishment late in the history of Majipoor.

The story opens outside the city of Pidruid, a provincial capital near the western coast of Zimroel. A young wanderer named Valentine, without purpose or prospects, arrives there to find the city in great excitement, for Lord Valentine the Coronal is making a grand administrative procession through the region. Valentine, an amiable and good-natured man, is unimpressed by the presence of his mighty namesake, but, drawn by mild curiosity, goes into Pidruid anyway to enjoy the festival. He is accompanied by a boy named Shanamir, an animal-herder whom he has met near Pidruid.

At the inn to which Shanamir takes him, Valentine meets a company of jugglers — six giant four-armed creatures known as Skandars, and two humans, a wry little man named Sleet and a lithe young woman called Carabella. Valentine shows some rudimentary talents for juggling; and, since a law promulgated by the new Coronal requires a certain proportion of human performers in every entertainment troupe, he is offered a job by Zalzan Gibor, the gruff-mannered leader of the company. Valentine, having no other employment and attracted to the jugglers' itinerant life, accepts the offer, though stipulating that they must hire his young friend Shanamir also.

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After several days of intensive training by Sleet and Carabella, Valentine is deemed fit to join the jugglers in a performance at the grand festival in the Coronal's honor. They go before Lord Valentine — a dark, intense, disturbing figure — in the stadium at Pidruid and Valentine, though a novice, acquits himself honorably enough. That night all of Pidruid is the scene of frenzied revelry, which Valentine attends in Carabella's company; and before dawn they become lovers. Afterward, as Valentine sleeps, he is smitten by a dream that brings him piercing pain. Dream-interpretation is central to self-understanding on Majipoor, but he is baffled by the terrifying images that came to him. In conversation with Carabella it emerges that Valentine has almost no trustworthy memories of his past against which the dream can be examined; he is in fact in a kind of amnesia.

When the festival is over the troupe leaves Pidruid to seek employment in marketplaces and theaters inland. Aside from the jugglers, the group includes Autifon Deliamber, a diminutive wizard of the Vroon species, who serves as guide and adviser, and an unactractive person of the Hjort kind, Vinorkis, a sort of business manager. They all travel in a huge and resplendent wagon owned by Zalzan Gibor. Valentine continues to be plagued by troublesome dreams, and in the town of Falkynkip consults a dream-speaker, who interprets his dreams as implying that he has fallen from some high place and must begin to climb back to it. The wizard Deliamber, who has telepathic powers and who already perceives many things about Valentine that Valentine himself is incapable of seeing, now begins to maneuver and nudge Valentine toward self-understanding. Through dream analysis, telepathic communion, and blunt confrontation, Deliamber forces Valentine to see the truth: that he is in fact Lord Valentine the Coronal, robbed of his throne by some usurper and cast into another man's body. This is the essence of the dreams Valentine has been having, but he has rejected the idea as wildly implausible, and he continues to reject it until Deliamber leads him to a point where he can no longer deny his true rank.

But Valentine is horrified. He has been robbed, too, of all desire to wield power. He much prefers the simple life of an easy-going juggler, and shrinks from the responsibility of governing. He confides in Carabella, who is appalled by her intimacy with one so great, and draws back from him; with difficulty he soothes her fears and pledges her to secrecy. One particularly intense dream seems to tell him that the usurper is Dominin Barjazid, the son of the King of Dreams. He awakens in dismay, knowing that if he is indeed Coronal his sense of honor and obligation will compel him to seek to undo the usurpation, even though he has no hunger for the job. Gigantic incomprehensible demands loom before him, and he is bewildered and distressed. Carabella asks him what he will do.

"Travel with the Skandars," he says. "Continue to juggle. Master the

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art more thoroughly. Keep close watch on my dreams. Bide my time, seek to comprehend. What else can I do, Carabella? What else can I do?"

As Zalzan Gibor and his troupe of jugglers wend their way eastward across the great continent of Zimroel, Valentine strives to come to grips with his true status as deposed Coronal of Majipoor. He is still at least partly skeptical of the whole notion; and, if indeed he is Coronal, he continues to feel reluctance to embroil Majipoor in civil war for the sake of regaining his throne. The wizard Autifon Deliamber serves as his mentor, gradually leading him to see that he has no choice: he is the Lawfully consecrated ruler, trained for the task and anointed, and he must seek to recover his memory and restore the fabric of the commonwealth.

Valentine resolves to make his way to the Isle of Sleep and gain the aid of his mother, the Lady of the Isle. Though his outward appearance is no longer that of Lord Valentine, she should be able through her arts and through her knowledge of his soul to confirm his identity and help him in his quest.

But the Isle of Sleep is halfway across giant Majipoor and Valentine is a penniless juggler. All he can do is travel with the troupe, saving his coins and biding his time. And so they go, from city to city, across the weird and wondrous landscape. At a place in the woods the road is blocked by mischievous ape-like creatures known as forest-brethren, and they are unable to go until they are rescued by an enormous Falstaffian warrior-woman named Lisamon Hultin, who hires on as their guardian. After many adventures the jugglers decide to look for employment in the territory of the Metamorphs, the native race of Majipoor. These folk have the power of shapeshifting, and, sullen and resentful, practice all sorts of trickery; it is dangerous business to enter their domain, but Zalzan Gibor, seeking lucrative engagements, will not be dissuaded. A festival is under way at the Metamorph capital of Ilirivoyne, he says, and there is money to be made there.

As they continue, Valentine's character gradually changes. Bits and pieces of his memory are returning, and he grows more sure of himself, more like one trained to command. In subtle ways the leadership of the group begins to shift from Zalzan Gibor to him, although none of the Skandars have any inkling of Valentine's true identity. He is still basically the easy-going cheerful wanderer of the Pidruid days, but an underlying strength of purpose is reintegrating itself within him.

In Piurifayne, the province of the Metamorphs, the jugglers receive a cool and disturbing welcome. When they perform at the Ilirivoyne festival the audience is indifferent; and then the Metamorphs stage a bizarre and ominous pantomime for them in which they flicker between the appearance of Valentine the juggler and Lord Valentine the Coronal. This conveys the truth about Valentine to the other jugglers, who kneel, dumbfounded, in homage to him. The situation seems

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threatening, and Valentine leads a quick strategic retreat from Ilirivoyne, pausing only long enough to set free some forest-brethren and an alien being named Khun who had been penned by the Metamorphs to use as sacrifices. Khun joins them in their flight through the forest.

During the night the jugglers are ambushed by Metamorphs. Several of the Skandars are killed and the wagon is burned. The survivors, helped by forest-brethren grateful for the release of their kinsmen, make their way on foot to the wild, turbulent River Steiche. There they build rafts, intending to float downstream to the great city of Ni-moya. But they enter a zone of rapids; Valentine's raft is smashed on rocks and he loses sight of the others, and is swept away into the river. He awakens on a pebble-strewn beach, battered and dazed and alone. Gathering what remains of his strength, he tells himself that he will look for other survivors, and then, with them or without, he'll set out onward, toward the east, toward the Isle of the Lady and whatever else lies ahead for him.

THREE: THE BOOK OF THE ISLE OF SLEEP

For what felt like months or perhaps years Valentine lay sprawled naked on his warm flat rock on the pebbly beach where the unruly River Steiche had deposited him. The roar of the river was a constant drone in his ears, oddly soothing. The sunlight enfolded him in a hazy golden nimbus, and he told himself that its touch would heal his bruises and abrasions and contusions, if only he lay still long enough. Vaguely he knew he ought to rise and see about shelter and begin to search for his companions, but he barely could find the strength to turn from one side to the other.

This was no way, he knew, for a Coronal of Majipoor to conduct himself. Such self-indulgence might be acceptable for merchants or tavernkeepers or even jugglers, but a higher discipline rested upon one who had pretensions to govern. Therefore get to your feet, he told himself, and clothe your body and start walking northward along the riverbank until you reach those who can help you regain your lofty place. Yes. Up, Valentine! But he remained where he was. He had expended every scrap of energy in him during the helter-skelter plunge down the rapids. Lying here like this, he had a powerful sense of the immensity of Majipoor, its thousands of miles of circumference stretching out beneath his limbs, a planet large enough to comfortably house twenty billion people without crowding, a planet of enormous cities and wondrous parks and forest preserves and sacred districts and agricultural territories, and it seemed to him that if he took the trouble to rise, it would be necessary for him to cover all that colossal domain on foot, step by step by step. It seemed simpler to stay where he was.

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Something tickled the small of his back, something rubbery and insistent. He ignored it.

"Valentine?"

He ignored that too, for a moment.

The tickling occurred again. But by then it had filtered through his fatigue-dulled brain that someone had spoken his name, and therefore that one of his companions must have survived after all. Joy flooded his soul. With what little energy he could muster, Valentine raised his head and saw the small many-limbed figure of Autifon Deliamber standing beside him. The Vroonish wizard was about to prod him a third time.

"You're alive!" Valentine cried.

"Evidently I am. And so are you, more or less."

"And Carabella? Shanamir?"

"I have not seen them."

"As I feared," Valentine murmured dully. He closed his eyes and lowered his head and in leaden despair lay once more like jetsam.

"Come," Deliamber said. "There is a vast journey ahead of us."

"I know. That's why I don't want to get up."

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. But I want to rest, Deliamber, I want to rest a hundred years."

The sorcerer's tentacles probed and poked Valentine in a dozen places. "No serious damage," the Vroon murmured. "Much of you is still healthy."

"Much of me isn't," said Valentine indistinctly. "What about you?"

"Vroons are good swimmers, even old ones like me. I am unhurt. We should go on, Valentine."

"Later."

"Is this how a Coronal of Majip—"

"No," Valentine said. "But a Coronal of Majipoor would not have had to shoot the Steiche rapids on a slapped-together log raft. A Coronal would not have been wandering in this wilderness for days and days, sleeping in the rain and eating nothing but nuts and berries. A Coronal —"

"A Coronal would not allow his lieutenants to see him in a condition of indolence and spiritlessness," Deliamber said sharply. "And one of them is approaching right now."

Valentine blinked and sat up. Lisamon Hultin was striding along the beach toward them. She looked a trifle disarranged, her clothing in shreds, her gigantic fleshy body purpled with bruises here and there, but her pace was jaunty and her voice, when she called out to them, was as booming as ever.

"Hoy! Are you intact?"

"I think so," Valentine answered. "Have you seen any others?"

"Carabella and the boy, half a mile or so back that way."

He felt his spirits soar. "Are they all right?"

"She is, at any rate."

"And Shanamir?" Valentine asked in alarm.

The giantess said, "Doesn't want to

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wake up. She sent me out to look for the sorcerer. Found him faster than I thought. Phaugh, what a river! That raft came apart so fast it was almost funny! The same happened to yours, I suppose?"

Valentine nodded. He reached for his clothing, found it still wet, and, with a shrug, dropped it to the rocks. "We must get to Shanamir at once. Have you news of Khun and Sleet?"

"Didn't see them. I went into the river and when I came up I was alone."

"And the Skandars?"

"No sign of them at all." To Deliamber she said, "Where do you think we are, wizard?"

"Far from anywhere," the Vroon replied. "Safely out of the Metamorph lands, at any rate. Come, take me to the boy."

Lisamon Hultin scooped up Deliamber and strode back along the beach with him riding her shoulder, while Valentine, finding himself not as feeble as he had imagined himself to be, limped along behind them, carrying his damp clothing over his arm. After a time they came upon Carabella and Shanamir camped in an inlet of bright white sand surrounded by thick river-reeds with scarlet stems. Carabella wore only a brief leather skirt, and looked somewhat battered, though in reasonably good shape. But Shanamir lay unconscious, breathing slowly, his skin an odd dark hue.

"Oh, Valentine!" Carabella cried, springing up and running to him. "I saw you swept away — and then — and then — oh, I thought I'd never see you again!"

He held her close against him. "And I thought the same. I thought you were lost to me forever, love."

"Were you hurt?"

"Not permanently," he said. "And you?"

"I was tossed and tossed and tossed until I couldn't remember my own name. But then I found a calm place and I swam to shore, and Shanamir was already there, but he wouldn't wake up. And Lisamon came out of the underbrush and said she'd try to find Deliamber, and — will he be all right, wizard?"

"In a moment," said Deliamber, arranging his tentacle-tips over the boy's chest and forehead, as if making some transfer of energy. Shanamir grunted and stirred. His eyes opened tentatively, closed, opened again. In a thick voice he began to say something, but Deliamber told him to be silent, to lie still, to let the strength flow back into him.

There was no question of attempting to move on that afternoon. Valentine and Carabella constructed a crude shelter out of reeds; Lisamon Hultin assembled a meager dinner of raw fruit and young pininna-sprouts; and they sat in silence beside the river, watching a spectacular sunset, bands of violet and gold streaking the great dome of the sky, reflections in luminous tones of orange and purple in the water, un-

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dertones of pale green, satiny red, silken crimson, and then the first puffs of gray and black, the swift descent of night. This was, Valentine thought, a place of extraordinary beauty, and he hoped that someday he might see it again, although perhaps he would not be naked and half-starved the next time.

In the morning they all felt able to proceed, though stiff from a night in the open. Shanamir showed no ill effects: Deliamber's care and the natural resilience of youth had restored his vitality.

Patching together their clothing as best they could, they set out to the north, following the beach until it gave out, then continuing through the forest of gawky androdragma-trees and flowering alabandina that flanked the river. The air was soft and mild here, and the sun, descending in dappled splotches through the treetops, gave a welcome warmth to the weary stragglers.

In the third hour of the march Valentine caught the scent of fire just ahead, and what smelled very much like the aroma of grilled fish. He jogged forward, salivating, prepared to buy, beg, if necessary steal, some of that fish, for it had been more days than he cared to count since he had last tasted cooked food. Down a rough talus slope he skidded, into sunlight on white pebbles, so bright he could barely see. In the glare he made out three figures crouched over a fire by the river's edge, and when he shaded his eyes he discovered that one was a compact human with pale skin and a startling shock of white hair, and another was a long-legged blue-skinned being of alien birth, and the third a Hjort.

"Sleet!" Valentine cried. "Khun! Vinorkis!"

He ran toward them, slipping and sliding over the rocks.

They watched his wild approach calmly, and when he was close by them Sleet, in a casual manner, handed him a stake on which was spitted a filet of some pink-fleshed river fish.

"Have some lunch," Sleet said amiably.

Valentine gaped. "How did you get so far ahead of us? What did you build this fire with? How did you catch the fish? What have you —"

"Your fish will get cold," Khun said. "Eat first, questions after."

Valentine took a hasty bite — he had never tasted anything so delicious, a tender moist meat splendidly seared, surely as elegant a morsel as had ever been served in the feasts on Castle Mount — and, turning, called to his companions to come down the slope. But they were already on their way, Shanamir whooping and cavorting as he ran, Carabella gracefully darting over the rocks, Lisamon Hultin, with Deliamber on her arm, pounding thunderously toward him.

"There's fish for all!" Sleet proclaimed.

They had caught at least a dozen, which circled sadly in a shallow rock-

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rimmed pool near the fire. Efficiently Khun plucked them forth and split and gutted them. Sleet held them briefly over the flame, and passed them to the others, who ate ravenously.

Sleet explained that when their raft had broken up they had found themselves clinging to one fragment of it, some three logs wide, and had managed to hang on to it all the way through the rapids and far downstream. They vaguely remembered having seen the beach where Valentine was cast ashore, but they had not noticed him on it as they passed by, and they had drifted another few miles before they had recovered enough from their rapids-running to want to let go of their logs and swim to the bank. Khun had caught the fish bare-handed: he had, said Sleet, the quickest hands he had ever seen, and would probably make a magnificent juggler. Khun grinned — the first time Valentine had seen anything but a grim expression on his face.

"And the fire?" Carabella asked. "You started it by snapping your fingers, I suppose?"

"We attempted it," Sleet answered smoothly. "But it proved to be strenuous work. So we walked over to the village of fisherfolk just beyond the bend and asked to borrow a light."

"Fisherfolk?" Valentine said, startled.

"An outpost of Liimen," said Sleet, "who evidently don't know that it's their racial destiny to sell sausages in the western cities. They gave us shelter last night and have agreed to ferry us up to Ni-moya this afternoon, so that we can wait for our friends at Nissimorn Beach." He smiled. "I suppose we'll need to hire a second boat, now."

Deliamber said, "Are we that close to Ni-moya?"

"Two hours by boat, so I'm told, to the place where the rivers flow together."

Suddenly the world seemed less huge to Valentine, and the chores that awaited him less overwhelming. To have eaten a real meal once again, and to know that a friendly settlement lay nearby, and that he would soon be leaving the wilderness behind, was tremendously cheering. Only one thing troubled him now, and that was the fate of Zalzan Gibor and his three surviving brothers; for although Valentine found the gruff Skandars without charm, he would be sorry to lose them.

The Liiman village was indeed close at hand — perhaps five hundred souls, short flat-headed dark-skinned people whose triple sets of bright fiery eyes regarded the wanderers with little curiosity. They lived in modest thatched huts close beside the river and raised an assortment of crops in small gardens to supplement the catch that their fleet of crude fishing boats brought in. Their dialect was a difficult one, probably a result of isolation here by the almost unnavigable Steiche, but Sleet seemed able to communicate with them and managed to arrange not only

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another boat but also the purchase, for a couple of crowns, of fresh clothing for Carabella and Lisamon Hultin.

In early afternoon they set out, with four taciturn Liimen as their crew, on the journey to Ni-moya.

The river ran as swift as ever here, but there were few rapids of any consequence, and the two boats sped nicely along through countryside increasingly populous and tame. The steep riverbanks of the uplands gave way, down here, to broad alluvial plains of heavy black silt, and an almost continuous strip of farming villages appeared shortly. No doubt these towns supplied produce for the vast city of Ni-moya, greatest of Zimroel's inland riverports.

And now the river widened and grew calm, becoming a broad, even waterway with the deep blue glint of a fathomless body. The land here was flat and open, affording a sense of enormous spaciousness, and though the settlements on both sides were doubtless goodly cities with populations of many thousands, they seemed mere hamlets, so dwarfed were they by the gigantic surroundings. Ahead lay a dark, immense headwater that seemed to span the entire horizon as though it were the open sea.

"River Zimr," announced the Liiman at the helm of Valentine's boat. "Steiche ends here. Nissimorn Beach on left."

Valentine beheld a huge crescent strand, bordered by a dense grove of palm trees of a pecularly lopsided shape, purplish fronds jutting up like ruffled feathers. The boats made quickly for it. As they drew near, Valentine was startled to see a raft of crudely trimmed logs on the beach and, sitting beside it, four giant shaggy four-armed figures. The Skandars were waiting for them.

2.

Zalzan Gibor saw nothing extraordinary about his voyage. His raft had come to the rapids; he and his brothers had poled their way through, getting jounced about a little, but not seriously; they had continued on downstream to Nissimorn Beach, where they had camped in growing impatience, wondering what was delaying the rest of the party. It had not occurred to the Skandar that the other rafts might have been wrecked in the passage, nor had he seen any of the castaways along the riverbank en route. "Did you have trouble?" he asked in what seemed to be genuine innocence.

"Of a minor sort," Valentine replied drily. "But we seem to be reunited, and it will be good to sleep in proper lodgings again tonight."

Together they resumed the journey, and presently they passed into the great confluence of the Steiche and the Zimr, a water so wide that it was impossible for Valentine to conceive it as

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the mere meeting-place of two rivers. At the town of Nissimorn on the southwestern shore they parted from the Liimen and boarded the ferry that would take them on across to Ni-moya, largest of the cities of the continent of Zimroel.

Thirty million citizens dwelled here. At Ni-moya the River Zimr made a great bend, changing its course sharply from easterly to southeasterly. There, a prodigious megalopolis had taken form. It spread for hundreds of miles along both banks of the river and up several tributaries that flowed in from the north. Valentine and his companions saw first the southern suburbs, primarily residential districts that gave way, in the extreme south, to the agricultural territory stretching down into the Steiche Valley. The main urban zone lay on the north bank and could only dimly be seen at first, tier upon tier of flat-topped white towers descending toward the river. Ferries by the dozens plied the water here, linking the myriad riverside towns, for the Zimr was far too wide to be bridged in this part of its course. The crossing took several hours, and twilight was beginning before Ni-moya proper was clearly in view.

The city looked magical. Its lights were just coming on, and they sparkled invitingly against the backdrop of heavily forested green hills and impeccable white buildings. Giant fingers of piers thrust into the river, and an incredible bustle of vessels great and small lined the waterfront. Pidruid, which had seemed so mighty to Valentine in his early days of wandering, was a minor city indeed compared with this.

Only the Skandars, Khun, and Deliamber had seen Ni-moya before. Carabella and Sleet had spent all their lives along Zimroel's western coast, mainly in the tropical cities; Lisamon Hultin was native to Khyntor and had never ventured this far east; and Shanamir and Vinorkis had seen only Pidruid province, and not even all of that. They gathered with Valentine to stare in awe at the vastness they were approaching.

Deliamber spoke of the marvels of Ni-moya: its Gossamer Galleria, a mercantile arcade a mile long raised above the ground on nearly invisible cables; its Park of Fabulous Beasts, where the rarest of Majipoor's fauna, those creatures brought closest to extinction by the spread of civilization, roved in surroundings approximating their natural habitats; its Crystal Boulevard, a glittering street of revolving reflectors that astounded the eye; its Grand Bazaar, fifteen square miles of maze-like passageways housing uncountable thousands of tiny shops under continuous roofs of dazzling yellow sparklecloth; its Museum of Worlds, its Chamber of Sorcery, its Ducal Palace, built on a heroic scale said to be surpassed only by Lord Valentine's Castle, and many other things that sounded, to Valentine,

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more like the stuff of myth and fantasy than anything one might encounter in a real city. But they would see none of these things. The thousand-instrument municipal orchestra, the floating restaurants, the artificial birds with jeweled eyes, and all the rest would have to wait until, if ever the day came, he returned to Ni-moya in a Coronal's robes. There was no time now to linger like vacationers.

As the ferry neared the slip, Valentine gathered the entire group and said, "Now we must determine our individual courses. I mean to take passage here for Piliplok and make my way from there to the Isle in the hope of reaching the Lady. I've prized your companionship this far, and I would have it even longer, but I can offer you nothing except endless journeying and the possibility of an early death. My hope of success is slight and the obstacles are formidable. Will any of you continue with me?"

"To the other side of the world!" Shanamir cried.

"And I," said Sleet, and Vinorkis the same.

"Would you have doubted me?" Carabella asked.

Valentine smiled. He looked to Deliamber, who said, "The sanctity of the realm is at stake. How could I not follow the rightful Coronal wherever he asks?"

"This mystifies me," Lisamon Hultin said. "I understand none of this business of a Coronal roaming out of his proper body. But I have no other employment, Valentine. I am with you."

"I thank you all," Valentine said. "I will thank you again, and more grandly, in the feasting-hall on Castle Mount. But it won't be soon."

Zalzan Gibor said, "And have you no use for Skandars, my lord?"

Valentine had not expected that. "Will you come?"

"Our wagon is lost. Our brotherhood is broken by death. We are without our juggling gear. I feel no calling to be a pilgrim on the Isle, but I will follow you there and beyond, and so also will my brothers, if you want us."

"I want you, Zalzan Gibor. Is there such a post as juggler to the royal court? You will have it, I promise!"

"Thank you, my lord," said the Skandar gravely.

"There is one more volunteer," said Khun.

"You too?" Valentine said in surprise.

The dour alien replied, "It matters little to me who is king of this planet where I am stranded. But it matters much to me to behave honorably. I would be dead now in Piurivar but for you. I owe you my life and I will give you such aid as I can."

Valentine shook his head. "We did for you only what any civilized being would do for any other. No debt exists."

"I see it otherwise. Besides," said Khun, "my life until now has been

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trival and shallow. I left my native Kianimot for no good reason to come here, and I lived foolishly here and nearly paid with my life, and why go on as I have been going? I will join your cause and make it mine, and perhaps I will come to believe in it, or feel that I do, and if I die to make you king, it will only even the debt between us. With a death well accomplished I can repay the universe for a life poorly spent. Can you use me?"

"With all my heart I welcome you," Valentine said.

The ferry released a grand blast of its horn and glided smoothly into its slip.

They stayed the night at the cheapest waterfront hotel they could find, a clean but stark place of whitewashed stone walls and communal tubs, and treated themselves to a modestly lavish dinner at an inn nearby. Valentine called for a pooling of funds and appointed Shanamir and Zalzan Gibor joint treasurers, since they seemed to have the finest appreciation among them of the value and uses of money. Valentine himself had much remaining of the funds he had had in Pidruid, and Zalzan Gibor produced from a hidden pouch a surprising stack of ten-royal pieces. The others had little money, but together they had enough to get them all to the Isle of Sleep.

In the morning they bought passage aboard a riverboat similar to the one that had carried them from Khyntor to Verf, and began their voyage to Piliplok, the great port at the mouth of the Zimr.

For all they had traveled across the face of Zimroel, some thousands of miles still separated them from the east coast. But on the broad breast of the Zimr, vessels moved swiftly and serenely, gliding seaward hour after hour in sweet regularity. Of course, the riverboat stopped again and again at the innumerable towns and cities of the river, Larnimisculus and Belka and Clarischanz, Flegit, Hiskuret, Centriun, Obliorn Vale, Salvamot, Gourkaine, Semirod and Cerinor and Haunfort Major, Impemond, Orgeliuse, Dambemuir, and many more, an unending flow of nearly indistinguishable places, each with its piers, its waterfront promenades, its plantings of palms and alabandinas, its gaily painted warehouses and sprawling bazaars, its ticket-clutching passenger eager to come on board and impatient for departure once they had ascended the ramp. Sleet whittled juggling clubs out of some scraps of wood he begged from the crew, and Carabella found balls somewhere to juggle, and at meals the Skandars quietly palmed dishware and slipped it out of sight, so that the troupe gradually accumulated implements to work with, and from the third day on they earned some extra crowns by performing on the plaza-deck. Zalzan Gibor, whose spirit had seemed broken by the calamity near Avendroyne, gradually regained some of his old gruff self-assurance now that

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he was performing again, although he still was oddly subdued, his soul moving on tiptoe through situations that once would have called forth angry storms.

This was the native territory of the four Skandars, who had been born in Piliplok and began their careers on circuit through the inland towns of the huge province, ranging as far upriver as Stenwamp and Port Saikforge, a thousand miles from the coast. This familiar countryside brightened them, these rolling tawny hills and bustling little cities of wooden buildings; and Zalzan Gibor spoke lengthily of his early career here, his successes and failures — very few of those — and of a dispute with an impresario that led him to seek fortune at the other end of Zimroel. Valentine suspected that there was some violence involved, perhaps some embroilment with the law, but he asked no questions. Even Rovorn and Gibor Haern and Erfon Gibor, who generally were content to let their blustery elder brother do their talking for them, became expansive here in Piliplok province, Rovorn favoring the troupe with an elaborate tale of youthful pranks in the hinterland and the other two joining in with choruses of reminiscence and rough laughter.

One night after much wine the Skandars even broke into song, for the first time in Valentine's time with them — a Skandar song, mournful and lugubrious, sung in a minor key as the singers shuffled about and about in a slump-shouldered circling march:

Dark my heart
Dark my fears
Dim my eyes
And full of tears.

Death and woe,
Death and woe,
Follow us
Where e'er we go.

Far the lands
I used to roam.
Far the hills
And streams of home.

Death and woe,
Death and woe,
Follow us
Where e'er we go.

Seas of dragons,
Lands of pain,
I shall not see
My home again.

Death and woe,
Death and woe,
Follow us
Where e'er we go.

The song was so unrelievedly gloomy, and the enormous Skandars looked so absurd as they lurched about chanting it, that it was all that Valentine and Carabella could do to hold back laughter at first. But by the sec-

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ond chorus Valentine actually found himself moved by it, for there seemed real emotion in the song: the Skandars *had* met death and woe, and, though they were close to home now, they had spent much of their lives far from Piliplok; and perhaps, Valentine thought, it was a harsh and painful thing to be a Skandar on Majipoor, a shaggy-pelted creature moving ponderously in the warm air among smaller and sleeker beings.

The summer now was over, and in eastern Zimroel it was the dry season, when warm winds blew from the south, vegetation went dormant until the spring rains, and, so said Zalzan Gibor, tempers became short and crimes of passion common. Valentine found this region less interesting than the jungles of the midcontinent or the subtropic floribundance of the far west, though he decided after a few days of close observation that it did have a certain austere beauty of its own, restrained and severe, quite unlike the riotous lushness of the west. All the same, he was pleased and relieved when, after day upon day on this changeless and seemingly unending river, Zalzan Gibor announced that the outskirts of Piliplok were in view.

3.

Piliplok was about as old and about as large as its counterpart port on the farther shore of the continent, Pidruid; but the resemblance went no deeper. For Pidruid had been built without a plan, a random tangle of streets and avenues and boulevards winding around one another according to whim, whereas Piliplok had been laid out, untold thousands of years ago, with rigid, almost maniacal, precision.

It occupied a promontory of great magnitude on the southern shore of the mouth of the Zimr. The river here was of inconceivable width, sixty or seventy miles across at the point where it flowed into the Inner Sea, and carrying the burden of silt and debris accumulated in all its swift seven-thousand-mile flow out of the far northwest, it stained the blue-green waters of the ocean with a dark tinge that, it was said, could be seen hundreds of miles out. The north headland at the river-mouth was a chalk cliff a mile high and many miles wide, which even from Piliplok was visible on a clear day, a shining white wall dazzling in the morning light. There was nothing over there that could in any way be used as a harbor, and so it had never been settled, but was set aside as a holy preserve. Devotees of the Lady lived there in a withdrawal from the world so total that no one had intruded on them in a hundred years. But Piliplok was another matter: eleven million people occupying a city that radiated in stern spokes from its magnificent natural habor. A series of curving bands crossed the axis of these spokes, the inner

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ones mercantile, then zones of industry and recreation, and in the outer reaches the residential neighborhoods, fairly sharply delimited by levels of wealth and to a lesser degree by race. There was a heavy concentration of Skandars in Piliplok — it seemed to Valentine that every third person on the waterfront belonged to Zalzan Gibor's people, and it was a little intimidating to see so many giant hairy four-armers swaggering about. Here, too, lived many of the aloof and aristocratic two-headed Su-Suheris folk, dealers in luxury commodities, fine fabrics and jewelry and the rarest handicrafts of every province. The air here was crisp and dry, and feeling the unyielding southerly wind hot against his cheeks, Valentine began to understand what Zalzan Gibor had meant about the short tempers kindled by that wind. "Does it ever stop blowing?" he asked.

"On the first day of spring," said Zalzan Gibor.

Valentine hoped to be elsewhere by then. But a problem immediately appeared. With Zalzan Gibor and Deliamber he went to Shkunibor Pier at the eastern end of Piliplok harbor to arrange transport to the Isle. For months now Valentine had imagined himself in this city and at that pier, and it had taken on an almost legendary glamor in his mind, a place of vast perspectives and sweeping architecture; and so it disappointed him more than a little to get there and find that the chief place of embarkation for the pilgrim-ships was a ramshackle, dilapidated structure, peeling green paint on its sides, tattered banners flapping in the wind.

Worse was in store. The pier seemed deserted. After some prowling, Zalzan Gibor found a departure schedule posted in a dark corner of the ticket house. Pilgrim-ships sailed for the Isle the first of every month — except in autumn, when sailings were spaced more widely on account of prevailing unfavorable winds. The last ship of the season had departed a week ago Starday. The next left in three months.

"Three months!" Valentine cried. "What will we do in Piliplok for three months? Juggle in the streets? Beg? Steal? Read the schedule again, Zalzan Gibor!"

"It will say the same," the Skandar declared. He grimaced. "I am fond of Piliplok beyond any place, but I have no love for it at wind-time. What foul luck!"

"Do no ships at all sail in this season?" Valentine asked.

"Only the dragon-ships," said Zalzan Gibor.

"And what are they?"

"Fishing vessels, that prey on the sea-dragons, which come together in herds to mate at this time of year and are easily taken. Plenty of dragon-ships set forth now. But what use are they to us?"

"How far out to sea do they go?" Valentine asked.

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"As far as they must make their catch. Sometimes as far as the Rodamaund Archipelago, if the dragons are swarming easterly."

"Where is that?"

Deliamber said, "It is a long chain of islands far out in the Inner Sea, midway from here to the isle of Sleep."

"Inhabited?"

"Quite heavily."

"Good. Surely there's commerce between islands, then. What if we hire one of these dragon-ships to take us on as passengers and carry us as far as this archipelago, and there we commission some local captain to transport us to the Isle?"

"Possibly," Deliamber said.

"There's no rule requiring all pilgrims to arrive by pilgrim-ship?"

"None that I know of," said the Vroon.

"The dragon-ships will not care to bother with passengers," Zalzan Gibor objected. "They never carry any such trade."

"Would a few royals arouse their interest in doing so?"

The Skandar looked doubtful. "I have no idea. Their trade's a lucrative one as it is. They might consider passengers a nuisance, or even bad luck. Nor would they necessarily agree to haul us out to the archipelago, if it happens to lie beyond this year's hunting track. Nor can we be sure, even if we do reach the archipelago, that anyone there would be willing to carry us further."

"On the other hand," Valentine said, "it might all be quite easy to arrange. We have money, and I'd rather use it persuading sea captains to give us passage than spend it on lodgings and food for the next three months in Piliplok. Where can we find the dragon-hunters?"

An entire section of the waterfront spanning three or four miles was set apart for their use, pier after pier after pier, and there were dozens of the huge wooden vessels in harbor, being outfitted for the new hunting season just beginning. The dragon-ships were of one design, and an ominous and morbid one it was, Valentine thought, for they were great bloated things with flaring outbellying hulls and enormous fanciful three-pronged masts and terrifying toothy figureheads at their prows and long spiky tails at their sterns. Most were decorated along their flanks with bold scarlet-and-yellow eye-patterns or rapacious-looking rows of white teeth; and high abovedecks were bristling cupolas for the harpooners and mammoth winches for the nets and bloodstained platforms where the butchering took place. To Valentine it was incongruous to make use of such a killer-vessel in reaching the peaceful and holy Isle of Sleep. But he had no other way.

And even this way soon began to seem doubtful. From ship to ship they went, from wharf to wharf, from drydock to drydock, and the dragon-captains listened without interest to their

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proposal and made swift refusals. Zalzan Gibor did most of the speaking, for the captains were mainly Skandars and might give sympathetic ear to one of their own kind. But no persuasion would sway them.

"You would be a distraction to the crew," said the first captain. "Forever stumbling over gear, getting seasick, making special requests for service —"

"We are not chartered to carry passengers," said the second. "The rules are strict."

"The archipelago lies south of our preferred waters," the third declared.

"I have long believed," said the fourth, "that a dragon-ship that goes to sea with strangers to the guild on board is a ship that will never return to Piliplok. I choose not to test that superstition this year."

"Pilgrims are no concern of mine," the fifth told them. "Let the Lady waft you to the Isle, if she will. You won't get there aboard my ship."

The sixth also refused, adding that no captain was likely to aid them. The seventh said the same. The eighth, having heard that a party of dry-landers was wandering the docks looking for passage, refused even to speak with them.

The ninth captain, a grizzled old Skandar with gaps in her teeth and faded fur, was more friendly than the others, though just as unwilling to make room for them on her vessel. She did, at least, have a suggestion. "On Prestimion Pier," she said, "you will find Captain Gorzval of the *Brangalyn*. Gorzval has made several unlucky voyages and is known to be short of funds; I heard him in a tavern just the other night trying to arrange a loan to pay for repairs to his hull. It may be that some extra revenue from passengers would be useful to him now."

"And where is Prestimion Pier?" Zalzan Gibor asked.

"The farthest in this line, beyond Dekkeret and Kinniken, just west of the salvage yard."

A berth close by the salvage yard seemed appropriate for the *Brangalyn*, Valentine thought bleakly an hour later, upon having his first view of Captain Gorzval's vessel. It looked about ready to be broken up for scrap. It was a smaller and older ship than the others he had seen, and at some point in its long history it must have suffered a stoven hull, for in its rebuilding it had become malproportioned, with mismatched timbers and an oddly sloping look to starboard. The painted eyes and teeth along the waterline had lost their luster; the figurehead was awry; the tailspikes had been snapped off eight or ten feet from their mountings, perhaps in a petulant swipe by an angry dragon; the masts had lost some of their yards also. Crewmen with a sluggish and dispirited look to them were at work, but not in any very effective way, caulking and coiling ropes and mending sail.

Captain Gorzval himself seemed as

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weary and worn as his vessel. He was a Skandar not quite as tall as Lisamon Hultin — virtually a dwarf, among his race — with a cast in one eye and a stump where his outer left arm should be. His fur was matted and coarse; his shoulders were slumped; his entire look was one of fatigue and defeat. But he brightened immediately at Zalzan Gibor's query about taking passengers to the Rodamaund Archipelago.

"How many?"

"Ten. Four Skandars, a Vroon, four humans, and one — other."

"All pilgrims, you say?"

"All pilgrims."

Gorzval made the sign of the Lady in a perfunctory way and said, "You know it's irregular for passengers to travel on a dragon-ship. But I owe the Lady recompense for past favors received. I'm willing to make an exception. Cash in advance?"

"Of course," said Zalzan Gibor.

Valentine quietly released his breath. This was a miserable dilapidated ship, and Gorzval probably a third-rate navigator dogged by bad fortune or even downright incompetence; nevertheless, he was willing to take them, and no one else would even entertain the idea.

Gorzval named his price and waited, with obvious tension, to be haggled with. What he asked was less than half what they had unsuccessfully offered the other captains. Zalzan Gibor, bargaining out of habit and pride, no doubt, attempted to cut three royals from that. Gorzval, plainly dismayed, offered a reduction of a royal and a half; Zalzan Gibor appeared ready to shave a few crowns from that, but Valentine, pitying the hapless captain, cut in quickly to say, "Done. When do we sail?"

"In three days," Gorzval said.

It turned out to be four, actually — Gorzval spoke vaguely of some need for additional refitting, by which he meant, Valentine discovered, patching of some fairly serious leaks. He had not been able to afford it until his passengers had hired on. According to the gossip in the dockside taverns, Lisamon Hultin reported, Gorzval had even been trying to mortgage part of his catch to raise the money for carpenters, but found no takers. He had, she said, a doubtful reputation: his judgment was inferior, his luck poor, his crew ill-paid and shiftless. Once he had missed the sea-dragon swarm entirely and returned empty to Piliplok; on another voyage he had lost his arm to a lively little dragon not quite as dead as he thought; and on this last one the *Brangalyn* had been struck amidships by an irritated beast and nearly sent to the bottom. "We might do better," Lisamon Hultin suggested, "by trying to swim to the Isle."

"Possibly we'll bring our captain better luck," said Valentine.

Sleet laughed. "If optimism alone could carry one to the throne, my lord, you'd be on Castle Mount by Winterday."

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Valentine laughed with him. But after the disaster in Piurifayne he hoped he was not leading these folk into a new catastrophe aboard this ill-favored vessel. They were following him, after all, on faith alone, on the evidence of dreams and wizardry and an enigmatic Metamorph prank: it would be shame and pain for him if, in his haste to reach the Isle, he caused them more grief. Yet Valentine felt powerful sympathy for the bedraggled stump-armed Gorzval. An unlucky mariner he might be — but a fitting helmsman, perhaps, for a Coronal so frowned upon by fortune that he had managed to lose throne and memory and identity all in a single night!

On the eve of the *Brangalyn's* departure, Vinorkis drew Valentine aside and said in a troubled tone, "My lord, we are being watched."

"How do you know?"

The Hjort smiled and preened his orange mustachios. "When one has done a little spying, one recognizes the traits in others. I've noticed a grayish Skandar lounging around the docks these past few days, asking questions of Gorzval's people. One of the ship's carpenters told me he was curious about the passengers Gorzval had taken on, and about our destination."

Valentine scowled. "I hoped we had shaken them off our track in the jungles!"

"They must have discovered us again in Ni-moya, my lord."

"Then we must lose them again in the archipelago," said Valentine. "And be wary until then of other spies along our way. I thank you, Vinorkis."

"No thanks are needed, my lord. It is my duty."

A strong wind blew from the south in the morning when the ship set forth. Vinorkis kept close look for the inquisitive Skandar at the pier during the embarkation, but he was nowhere in view; his work was done, Valentine supposed, and some other informant farther on would continue the surveillance on the usurper's behalf.

The route lay to the east and south; these dragon-ships were accustomed to tack against that constant hostile wind all the way to the hunting-grounds. it was a wearying business, but there was no avoiding it, for the sea-dragons were within the reach of hunters only at this season. The *Brangalyn* had supplementary engine power, but not any great deal of it, fuels of all kinds being so scarce on Majipoor. With a certain majestic clumsiness the *Brangalyn* picked up the side wind and moved out of Piliplok harbor into the open sea.

This was the smaller sea of Majipoor, the Inner Sea, which separated eastern Zimroel from western Alhanroel. It was no trifle — some five thousand miles from shore to shore — yet it was a mere puddle compared with the Great Sea that occupied most of the other hemisphere, an ocean beyond the possibility of navigation, untold thousands of miles of open water. The Inner Sea was more human in

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scale, and was broken midway between the continents by the Isle of Sleep — itself big enough so that on another world of less extraordinary size it would be considered a continent — and by several major island chains.

The sea-dragons spent their lives in unending migration between the two oceans. Round and round the globe they went, taking years or even decades, so far as anyone knew, making the circumnavigation. Perhaps a dozen great herds of them inhabited the ocean, traveling constantly from west to east. Every summer, in the hottest months, one of those herds would complete its journey across the Great Sea, passing south of Narabal and up the southern coast of Zimroel toward Piliplok. It was forbidden to hunt them then, for the herd abounded at that time with pregnant cows. By autumn the young were born, the herd now having reached the windswept waters between Piliplok and the Isle of Sleep, and the annual hunt began. Out from Piliplok came the dragon-ships in great numbers. The herds were thinned of both young and old, and the survivors made their way back into the tropics, passing south of the Isle of Sleep, rounding the hump of Alhanroel's lengthy Stoienzar Peninsula, and heading on eastward below Alhanroel to the Great Sea, where they would swim unmolested until their time brought them round to Piliplok again.

Of all the beasts of Majipoor the sea-dragons were by far the largest. Newborn, they were tiny, no more than five or six feet in length, but through all their lives they continued to grow, and their lifespans were long, although no one knew just how long. Gorzval, who let his passengers share his table and proved to be a talkative man now that his anxieties were behind him, was found of telling tales of the immensity of certain sea-dragons. One that had been taken in the reign of Lord Malibor was a hundred ninety feet in length, and another of Confalume's time two hundred forty, and in the era when Prestimion was Pontifex and Lord Dekkeret the Coronal they had caught one thirty feet longer than that. But the champion, said Gorzval, was one that had boldly appeared almost in the mouth of Piliplok harbor in the reign of Thimin and Lord Kinniken and had reliably been measured at three hundred fifteen feet. That monster, known as Lord Kinniken's dragon, had escaped unharmed because the entire fleet of dragon-ships was then far out to sea. Allegedly it had been sighted again several times by hunters in succeeding centuries, most recently in the year Lord Voriax became Coronal, but no one had ever laid a harpoon on it, and among hunters it had a baleful reputation. "It must be five hundred feet long by now," said Gorzval, "and I pray that some other captain is given the honor of encountering it when it returns to our waters."

Valentine had seen small sea-

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dragons, pithed, gutted, salted, and dried, sold in market places all over Zimroel, and on occasion he had tasted their meat, which was dark, tangy, and tough. Dragons less than ten feet long were the ones prepared in this way. The meat of larger ones, up to fifty feet or so, was butchered and sold fresh along the eastern coast of Zimroel, but difficulties of transportation kept it from finding markets far from the sea. Beyond that length the dragons were too old to be edible, but their flesh was rendered into oil that had many purposes, petroleum and other fossil hydrocarbons being scarce on Majipoor. The bones of sea-dragons of all sizes had their uses in architecture, for they were nearly as stong as steel and far more readily obtained, and there was medicinal value in the unborn dragon-eggs, found in quantities of many hundreds of pounds in the abdomens of mature females. Dragon-skin, dragon-wings, dragon-this and dragon-that, everything was put to some benefit and nothing wasted. "This, for example, is dragon-milk," said Gorzval, offering his guests a flask of pale bluish liquid. "In Ni-moya or Khyntor they'd pay ten crowns for a flask like this. Here, taste it."

Lisamon Hultin took a hesitant sip and spat it on the floor. "Dragon-milk or dragon-piss?" she demanded.

The captain smiled frostily. "In Dulorn," he said "what you spat out would cost you at least a crown, and you'd count yourself lucky to find some." He pushed the flask toward Sleet, who shook his head, and then to Valentine. After a moment's pause Valentine put it to his lips.

"Bitter," he said. "And a musty taste, but not entirely terrible. What's the secret of its appeal?"

The Skandar patted his thighs. "Aphrodisiac!" he boomed. "Stirs the juices! Heats the blood! Prolongs the life!" He pointed jovially at Zalzan Gibor, who, unasked, had taken a robust swig of the stuff. "See? The Skandar knows! The man of Piliplok doesn't need to be begged to drink it!"

Carabella said, "Dragon-*milk?* These are mammals?"

"Mammals, yes. The eggs are hatched within, so, and the young born alive, ten or twenty in a litter, rows of nipples all up and down the belly. You think it's odd, milk from dragons?"

"I think of dragons as reptiles," said Carabella, "and reptiles give no milk."

"Think of dragons as dragons, better. You want to taste?"

"Thank you, no," she replied. "My juices need no stirring."

The meals in the captain's cabin were the best part of the voyage, Valentine decided. Gorzval was good-natured and outgoing, as Skandars went, and he set a decent table, with wine and meats and fish of various sorts, including a good deal of dragon-flesh. But the ship itself was creaky and cramped, poorly designed and even

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more poorly maintained; and the crew, a dozen Skandars and an assortment of Hjorts and humans, was uncommunicative and often downright hostile. Obviously these dragon-hunters were a proud and insular lot, even the crew of a bedraggled vessel like the *Brangalyn*, and resented the presence of outsiders among them as they practiced their mysteries. Only Gorzval seemed at all hospitable, but he clearly felt grateful to them, for their fare was all that had allowed him to get his ship seaworthy.

They were far from land now, in a featureless realm where pale blue ocean met pale blue sky to obliterate all sense of place and direction. The course was a south-southeasterly one, and the farther they got from Piliplok the warmer grew the wind, hot now and dry as ever. "We call the wind our sending," said Gorzval, because it comes straight from Suvrael. The little gift of the King of Dreams, it is, as delightful as all his others." The sea was empty: no islands, no drifting logs, no sign of anything, not even dragons. The dragons had gone far past the coast this year, as they sometimes did, and were basking in the tropical waters close by the fringes of the archipelago. Occasionally a gihorna-bird passed far overhead, making its autumn migration from the islands to the Zimr Marsh, which was not near the Zimr at all but on the coast five hundred miles south of Piliplok; these long-legged creatures must have made tempting targets, but no one took aim at them. Another tradition of the sea, it seemed.

The first dragons manifested themselves the second week out from Piliplok. Gorzval predicted their arrival a day in advance, having dreamed that they were near. "Every captain dreams dragons," he explained. "Our minds are attuned to them: we feel their souls approaching us. There's a captain, a woman with some teeth out, Guidrag's her name, who can dream them a week away, sometimes more. Heads right to them and they're always there. Me, I'm not that good, can't do better than a day's distance. But nobody's as good as Guidrag, anyway. I do my best. We'll have dragons off the bow in another ten, twelve hours, that's a guarantee."

Valentine had little confidence in the Skandar captain's guarantees. But evidently Gorzval's dreams were reliable ones, for in midmorning the lookout high in the mast sang out, "Hoy! Dragons ho!" and indeed there were.

A great many of them, forty, fifty, mabe more, swarmed just off the *Brangalyn's* bow. They were big-bellied ungraceful beasts, broad in cross-section like the *Brangalyn* itself, with long thick necks, heavy triangular heads, short tails terminating in flat flaring flukes, and prominent ridges of bony projections running the length of their high-vaulted backs. Their wings were the strangest feature of all — fins, really, for it was inconceivable that

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these huge creatures should ever take to the air, but they looked far more like wings than fins, batwings, dark and leathery, sprouting from massive stumpy bases below the sea-dragons' necks and sweeping down half the length of their bodies. Most of the dragons kept their wings folded like cloaks, but some had them fully outspread, fanning them out along the axes provided by long fragile-looking finger-bones, and with them they covered the water about them for astonishing spreads, unfurling them like black tarpaulins.

The dragons were of all sizes. Most were young, twenty to fifty feet in length, but there were many newborn ones, six-footers or thereabouts, swimming and splashing freely or else gripping the nipples of their mothers, who tended to be of midsize range. But among the school drifted a few monsters, half-submerged and somnolent, their spine-ridges rising high above the water like the central hills of some floating island. They were unimaginably bulky. It was hard to judge their full magnitude, for their hind-quarters tended to droop out of sight, but two or three of them looked at least as large as the ship. As Gorzval passed him on the deck, Valentine said, "We don't have Lord Kinniken's dragon out there, do we?"

The Skandar captain chuckled indulgently. "Nay, the Kinniken's three times the size of those, at least. Three? More than three! Those are hardly hundred-fifty-footers. I've seen dozens bigger. So will you, friend, before long."

Valentine tried to imagine dragons three times the size of the biggest out there. His mind rebelled. It was like trying to visualize the full scope of Castle Mount: one simply could not do it.

The ship moved in for the kill. It was a smoothly coordinated operation. Boats were lowered, with a lance-wielding Skandar strapped upright in the bow of each. Among the nursing dragons the boats quietly moved, the lancer spearing one here, one there, apportioning the kill among the mothers so that none was aroused by total loss of her young. These young dragons were lashed by their tails to the boats; and as the boats returned to the ship, nets were lowered to hoist the catch. Only when some dozen young dragons had been taken did the hunters go for bigger game. The boats were retracted, and the harpooner, a giant Skandar with a naked dull-blue swathe across his chest where the fur had long ago been ripped away, took his place in the cupola. Unhurriedly he selected his weapon and nocked it into its catapult while Gorzval maneuvered the ship to give him a good shot at the chosen victim. The harpooner took aim; the dragons grazed on, heedless; Valentine discovered that he was holding his breath and intently squeezing Carabella's hand. Then the gleaming somber shaft of the harpoon was released.

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It buried itself to its haft in the blubbery shoulder of a dragon some ninety feet long, and instantly the sea came alive.

The wounded dragon lashed the surface with its tail and unfurled its wings, which beat against the water in titanic fury, as though the animal meant to burst into the air and soar off, dragging the dangling *Brangalyn* behind it. At that first frantic outburst of pain the mother-dragons opened their wings as well, gathering their nurslings into a protective shield, and with powerful strokes of their tails began to move away, while the largest of the herd, the utter monsters, simply sank from view, letting themselves glide into the depths with scarcely a ripple of energy. This left a dozen or so adolescent dragons, who knew that something disturbing was happening but were not sure how to react; they swam in wide circles around their wounded comrade, holding their wings tentatively half-spread and slapping lightly at the water with them. Meanwhile the harpooner, still choosing his weapons in absolute tranquility, put a second and a third into his prey, close by the first.

"Boats!" cried Gorzval. "Nets!"

Now began a strange proceeding. Once more the boats were lowered, and the hunters rowed forth. Toward the ring of excited dragons they headed and hurled into the water grenades of some sort that exploded with dull booming sounds, spreading a slick coating of bright yellow dye. The explosions and, it seemed, the dye, sent the remaining dragons into a frenzy of terror. With wild thrashings of wings and tails they swam swiftly out of sight. Only the victim remained, very much alive but held fast. It too was swimming, in a northerly direction, but it towed the entire mass of the *Brangalyn* along behind it, and it was visibly weakened moment by moment by the effort. The boatmen, with their dye-grenades, atempted to force the dragon closer to the ship; at the same time the team of netmen lowered a colossal webwork of fabric which by some interior mechanism opened and spread out over the water, and closed again when the dragon had entangled itself in its meshes.

"Winches!" Gorzval roared, and the net rose from the water. The dragon dangled, in midair its enormous weight causing the huge ship to list alarmingly. Far above, the harpooner rose in his cupola for the *coup de grace*. He gripped the catapult with all four hands and let fly. A ferocious grunt came from him as he released the weapon and an instant later came an answering sound, hollow, agonized, from the dragon. The harpoon penetrated the dragon's skull at a point just behind the great saucer-like green eyes. The mighty wings raked the air in one last terrible convulsion.

The rest was mere butchery. The winches did their work, the dragon was hoisted to the slaughter-block, the

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stripping of the carcass began. Valentine watched awhile, until the gory spectacle palled: the flensing of the blubber, the securing of the valuable internal organs, the severing of the wings, and all the rest. When he had had enough he went below, and when he returned a few hours later the skeleton of the dragon rose like a museum exhibit over the deck, a great white arch topped by that bizarre spiny ridge, and the hunters were at work disassembling even that.

"You look grim," Carabella said to him.

"I lack appreciation of this art," he answered.

It seemed to Valentine that Gorzval could entirely have filled the hold of his vessel, large as it was, with the proceeds of this one school of dragons. But he had chosen a handful of young and only one adult, not by any means the largest, and had deliberately driven the others away. Zalzan Gibor explained that there were quotas, decreed by Coronals in centuries past, to prevent overfishing: herds were to be thinned, not exterminated, and a ship that returned too soon from its voyage would be called to account and subjected to severe penalties. Besides, it was essential to get the dragons quickly on board, before predators arrived, and to process the flesh swiftly; a crew that hunted too greedily would be unable to handle its own catch in an effective and profitable way.

The season's first kill seemed to make Gorzval's crew more mellow. They nodded occasionally at the passengers, even smiled now and then, and went about their own tasks in a relaxed and almost cheerful way. Their sullen silence melted; they laughed, joked, sang on deck:

Lord Malibor was fine and bold
And loved the heaving sea,
Lord Malibor came off the Mount,
A hunter for to be.

Lord Malibor prepared his ship,
A gallant sight was she,
With sails all of beaten gold,
And masts of ivory.

Valentine and Carabella heard the singers — it was the squad barreling the blubber — and went aft to listen. Carabella, quickly picking up the simple robust melody, began to finger it on her pocket-harp, adding little fanciful cadenzas between the verses.

Lord Malibor stood at the helm
And faced the heaving wave,
And sailed in quest of the dragon free,
The dragon fierce and brave.

Lord Malibor a challenge called,
His voice did boom and ring.
"I wish to meet, I wish to fight,"
Quoth he, "the dragon king."

"I hear, my lord," the dragon cried,

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And came across the sea.
Twelve miles long and three miles wide
And two miles deep was he.

"Look," Carabella said. "There's Zalzan Gibor."

Valentine glanced across the way. Yes, there was the Skandar, listening at the far side near the rail, all his arms folded, a deepening scowl on his face. He did not seem to be enjoying the song. What was the matter with him?

Lord Malibor stood on the deck
And fought both hard and well.
Thick was the blood that flowed that day
And great the blows that fell.

But dragon kings are old and sly,
And rarely are they beaten.
Lord Malibor, for all his strength
Eventually was eaten.

All sailors bold, who dragons hunt,
Of this grim tale take heed!
Despite all luck and skill, you may
End up as dragon-feed.

Valentine laughed and clapped his hands. That brought an immediate fierce glare from Zalzan Gibor, who strode toward them looking huffy with indignation.

"My lord!" he cried. "Will you tolerate such irreverent —"

"Not so loud on the *my lord*," Valentine said crisply. "Irreverent, you say? What are you talking about?"

"No respect for a terrible tragedy! No respect for a fallen Coronal! No respect for —"

"Zalzan Gibor!" Valentine said slyly. "Are you such a lover of respectability, then?"

"I know what is right and what is wrong, my lord. To mock the death of Lord Malibor is —"

"Be more easy, my friend," Valentine said gently, putting his hand on one of the Skandar's gigantic forearms. "Where Lord Malibor has gone, he is far beyond matters of respect or disrespect. And I thought the song was a delight. If *I* take no offense, Zalzan Gibor, why should you?"

But Zalzan Gibor continued to grumble and bluster. "If I may say it, my Lord, you may not yet be returned to a full sense of the rightness of things. If I were you, I would go to those sailors now and order them never to sing such a thing again in your presence."

"In my presence?" Valentine said, with a broad grin. "Why should they care dragon-spittle for my presence? Who am I but a passenger, barely tolerated at all. If I said any such thing, I'd be over the rail in a minute, and dragon-feed myself the next. Eh? Think about it, Zalzan Gibor! And calm yourself, fellow. It's only a silly sailor-song."

"Nevertheless," the Skandar muttered, walking stiffly away.

Carabella giggled. "He takes himself so seriously."

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"Not so seriously, I hope, that he'd order them in my name to give up the song," Valentine said. He began to hum, then to sing:

All sailors bold, who dragons hunt,
Of this —
Of this sad tale? —
Of this sad tale take heed!

"Yes, that's it," he said. "Love, will you do me a service? When those men are through with their work, draw one of them aside — the red-bearded one, I think, with the deep bass voice — and have him teach you the words. And then teach them to me. And I can sing it to Zalzan Gibor to make him smile, eh? How does it go? Let's see —"

"I hear, my lord," the dragon cried,
And came across the sea.
Twelve miles long and three miles wide
And two miles deep was he —

A week or thereabouts passed before they sighted dragons again, and in that time not only Carabella and Valentine learned the ditty, but Lisamon Hultin as well, who took pleasure in bellowing it across the decks in her raucous baritone. But Zalzan Gibor continued to growl and snort whenever he heard it.

The second school of dragons was much larger than the first, and Gorzval allowed the taking of some two dozen small ones, one midsized one, and one titan at least a hundred thirty feet long. That kept all hands busy for the next few days. The deck ran purple with dragons' blood, and bones and wings were stacked all over the ship as the crew labored to get everything down to storable size. At the captain's table delicacies were offered, from the most mysterious inner parts of the creature, and Gorzval, ever more expansive, brought forth casks of fine wines, quite unsuspected from someone who had been at the edge of bankruptcy. "Piliplok golden," he said, pouring with a lavish hand. "I have saved this wine for some special occasion, and doubtless this is it. You have brought us excellent luck."

"Your fellow captains will not be joyed to hear that," Valentine said. "We might easily have sailed with them, if they had only known how charmed we were."

"Their loss, our gain. To your pilgrimage, my friends!" cried the Skandar captain.

They were moving now through ever more balmy waters. The hot wind out of Suvrael relented here at the edge of the tropics, and a kinder, moister breeze came to them out of the southwest, from the distant Stoienzar Peninsula of Alhanroel. The water was a deep green hue, sea-birds were numerous, algae grew so thick in places that navigation was sometimes complicated, and brightly colored fish could be seen darting just below the surface — the prey of the dragons, who were

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flesh-eaters and swam open-mouthed through swarms of lesser sea-creatures. The Rodamaund Archipelago now lay not far away. Gorzval proposed to complete his haul here: the *Brangalyn* had room for another few large dragons, two more of midsize, and perhaps forty of the small, and then he would drop his passengers and head for Piliplok to market his catch.

"Dragons ho!" came the lookout's cry.

This was the greatest school yet, hundreds of them, spiny humps rising above the water everywhere. For two days the *Brangalyn* moved among them, slaughtering at will. On the horizon other ships could be seen, but they were far off, for strict rules governed impinging on hunting territory.

Gorzval seemed to glow with the success of his voyage. He himself took frequent turns in the boat-crews, which Valentine gathered was unusual, and once he even made his way to the cupola to wield a harpoon. The ship now was settling low to the waterline with the weight of dragon-flesh.

On the third day dragons were still close about them, undismayed by the carnage and unwilling to scatter. "One more big one," Gorzval vowed, "and then we make for the islands."

He selected an eighty-footer for the final target.

All hands concentrated on the task. Valentine had grown bored, and more than bored, with the butchery, and as the harpooner sent his third shaft into the prey, he turned away and walked to the far side of the deck. There he found Sleet, and they stood by the rail, peering off to the east.

"Do you think we can see the archipelago from here?" Valentine asked. "I long for solid land again, and an end to the stink of dragon-blood in my nostrils."

"My eyes are keen, my lord, but the islands are two days' sailing from here, and I think even my vision has limits. But—" Sleet gasped. "My lord-"

"What is it?"

"An island comes swimming toward us, my lord!"

Valentine stared, but with difficulty at first: it was morning and a brilliant fiery glare lit the surface of the sea. But Sleet took Valentine's hand and pointed with it, and then Valentine saw. A rigid dragon-spike broke the water, a spine that went on and on and on, and below it a vast and implausible bulk was dimly visible.

"Lord Kinniken's dragon!" Valentine said in a choked voice. "And it comes straight at us!"

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Kinniken's it might be, or more likely some other not nearly so great, but it was great enough, larger than the *Brangalyn*, and it was bearing down on them steadily and unhesitatingly — either an avenging angel or else an unthinking force, there was no knowing that, but its mass was unarguable.

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"Where is Gorzval?" Sleet blurted. "Weapons — guns —"

Valentine laughed. "As easily stop a rock-slide with a harpoon, Sleet. Are you a good swimmer?"

Most of the hunters were preoccupied with their catch. But some had looked the other way, now, and there was frantic activity on deck. The harpooner had whirled round and stood outlined against the sky, weapons in every hand. Others had mounted the adjoining cupolas. Valentine, searching for Carabella and Deliamber and the others, caught sight of Gorzval rushing madly toward the helm; the Skandar's face was livid and his eyes were bugging, and he looked like one who stood in the presence of the ministers of death.

"Lower the boats!" someone screamed. Winches turned. Figures ran about wildly. One, a Hjort black-cheeked with fear, shook a fist at Valentine and caught him roughly by the arm, muttering, "You brought this on us! You should never have been allowed on board, any of you!"

Lisamon Hultin appeared from somewhere and swept the Hjort aside like so much chaff. Then she flung her powerful arms around Valentine as if to protect him from any harm that might come.

"The Hjort was right, you know," said Valentine calmly. "We *are* an ill-omened bunch. First Zalzan Gibor loses his wagon, and now pool Gorzval loses —"

There was a ghastly impact as the onrushing dragon crashed broadside into the *Brangalyn*.

The ship heeled over as though it had been pushed by a giant's hand, then rolled dizzyingly back the other way. An awful shudder shook its timbers. A secondary impact came — the wings hitting the hull, the thrashing flukes? — and then another, and the *Brangalyn* bobbed like a cork. "We're stove in!" a desperate voice cried. Things rolled free on the deck, a giant rendering cauldron breaking its moorings and tumbling over three hapless crewmen, a case of boning-axes ripping loose and skidding over the side. As the ship continued to sway and lurch, Valentine caught a glimpse of the great dragon on the far side, where the recent catch still hung, unbalancing everything; and the monster swung around and headed in for another attack. There could be no doubt now of the purposefulness of its onslaught.

The dragon struck, shoulder-side on; the *Brangalyn* rocked wildly; Valentine grunted as Lisamon Hultin's grip became an almost crushing embrace. He had no idea where any of the others might be, nor whether they would survive. Clearly the ship was doomed. Already it was listing badly as water poured into the hold. The tail of the dragon rose and struck again. Everything dissolved into chaos. Valentine felt himself flying; he soared gracefully, he dipped and bobbed, he plunged with elegance and skill toward the water.

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He landed in something much like a whirlpool and was drawn down into the terrible turbulent spin.

As he went under Valentine could not help but hear the ballad of Lord Malibor ringing in his mind. In truth that Coronal had taken a fancy for dragon-hunting some ten years back and had gone out in what was said to be the finest dragon-ship in Piliplok, and the ship had been lost with all hands. No one knew what had happened, but — so it came out of Valentine's spotty recollections — the government had spoken of a sudden storm. More likely, he thought, it had been this killer-beast, this avenger of dragonkind.

Twelve miles long and three miles wide,
And two miles deep was he —

And now a second Coronal, successor but one to Malibor, would meet the same fate. Valentine was oddly unmoved by that. He had thought himself dying in the rapids of the Steiche and had survived that; here, with a hundred miles of sea between him and any sort of safety, and a rampaging monster lashing about close at hand, he was even more surely doomed, but there was no use bemoaning it. The Divine had clearly withdrawn its favor from him. What grieved him was that others whom he loved would die with him, merely because they had been loyal, because they had pledged themselves to follow him on his journey to the Isle, because they had tied themselves to a luckless Coronal and a luckless dragon-captain and now must share their evil destinies.

He was sucked deep into the heart of the ocean and ceased to ponder the tides of luck. He struggled for breath, coughed, choked, spat out water and swallowed more. His head pounded mercilessly. *Carabella,* he thought, and darkness engulfed him.

Valentine had never, since awakening out of his broken past to find himself near Pidruid, given much thought to a philosophy of death. Life held challenges enough for him. He recalled vaguely what he had been taught in boyhood, that all souls return to the Divine at their last moment when the release of life-energy comes, and travel over the Bridge of Farewells, the bridge that is the prime responsibility of the Pontifex. But whether there might be truth in that, whether there was a world beyond, and if so of what sort, Valentine had never paused to consider. Now, though, he returned to consciousness in a place so strange that it surpassed the imaginings of even the most fertile of thinkers.

Was this the afterlife? It was a giant chamber, a great silent room with thick moist pink walls and a roof that was in places high and domed, supported by mighty pillars, and in other places drooped until it nearly touched the floor. In that roof were mounted huge glowing hemispheres that emitted

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a faint blue light, as if by phosphorescence. The air in here was rank and steamy, and had a sharp, bitter flavor, unpleasant and stifling. Valentine lay on his side against a wet slippery surface, rough to the touch, deeply corrugated, quivering with constant deep palpitations and tremors. He put the flat of his hand to it and felt a kind of convulsion deep within. The texture of the ground was like nothing he had known before, and those tiny but perceptible motions within it made him wonder if that he had entered was not the world after death but merely some grotesque hallucination.

Valentine got unsteadily to his feet. His clothing was soaked, he had lost one boot somewhere, his lips burned with the taste of salt, his lungs seemed full of water, and he felt shaky and dazed; furthermore it was hard to keep upright on this unendingly trembling surface. Looking about, he saw by the dim pale luminosity a kind of vegetation, pliant whip-shaped growths, thick and fleshy and leafless, sprouting from the ground. They too writhed with inner animation. Making his way between two lofty pillars and through an area where ceiling and floor almost met, he caught sight of what seemed to be a pond of some greenish fluid. Beyond that he was unable to see in the dimness.

He walked toward the pond and perceived something exceedingly odd in it: hundreds of brightly colored fish, of the kind that he had seen flitting about in the water before the day's hunt had begun. They were not swimming now. They were dead and decaying, flesh stripping away from bones, and below them in the pool was a carpet of similar bones, many feet thick.

Suddenly there was a sound as of the roaring of the wind behind him. Valentine turned and saw the walls of the chamber in motion, pulling back, the drooping places in the ceiling retracting to create a vast open space; and a torrent of water came rushing toward him, as high as his hips. He barely had time to reach one of the ceiling-pillars and fling his arms tight about it; then the inrushing water sluiced about him with tremendous force. He held on. It seemed that half the Inner Sea was pouring past him, and for a moment he thought he would lose his grip, but then the flow subsided and the water drained away through slits that materialized abruptly in the floor — leaving in its wake scores of stranded fish. The floor convulsed; the fleshy whips swept the desperate flopping fish across the floor to the greenish pool; and once they entered it they quickly ceased to move.

Suddenly Valentine understood.

I am not dead, he knew, nor is this any place of afterlife. I am within the belly of the dragon.

He began to laugh.

Valentine threw back his head and let giant guffaws pour from him. What other response was fitting? To cry? To curse? The vast beast had gobbled him

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whole at a gulp, had sucked in the Coronal of Majipoor as heedlessly as it might a minnow. But he was too big to be propelled into that digestive pond down there. So here he was, camped on the floor of the dragon's maw, in this cathedral of an alimentary canal. What now? Hold court for the fishes? Dispense justice among them as they came sweeping in? Settle down here and spend the rest of his days dining on raw fish stolen from the monster's catch?

It was high comedy, Valentine thought.

But dark tragedy as well, for Sleet and Carabella and young Shanamir and all the others, drawn down to death in the wreck of the *Brangalyn*, victims of their own sympathies and of his awesomely bad luck. For them he felt only anguish. Carabella's lilting voice silenced forever, and Sleet's miraculous skills of hand and eye forever lost, and the rough-souled Skandars no longer to fill the air with whirling multitudes of knives and sickles and torches, and Shanamir cut off before he had fairly begun his life —

Valentine could not bear thinking about them.

For himself, though, there was only cosmic amusement at this absurd plight. To take his mind from grief and pain and loss, he laughed again, and stretched his arms wide to the distant walls of the strange room. "Lord Valentine's Castle, this is!" he cried. "The throne room! I invite you all to dine with me in the grand feasting hall!"

Out of the murky distance a booming voice called, "By my gut, I accept that invitation!"

Valentine was astounded beyond all measure.

"Lisamon?"

"No, it's the Pontifex Tyeveras and his cross-eyed uncle! Is that you, Valentine?"

"Yes! Where are you?"

"In the gizzard of this stinking dragon! Where are you?"

"Not far from you! But I can't see you!"

"Sing," she called. "Stay where you are and sing, and keep singing! I'll try to reach you!"

Lord Malibor was fine and bold
And loved the heaving sea —

Again the roaring sound came; again the great creature's gullet opened to admit a cascade of sea water and a horde of fish; again Valentine clung to a pillar as the influx hit him.

"Oh — by the Divine's toes," Lisamon cried. "Hang on, Valentine, hang on!"

He hung on until the force was spent, and slumped against the pillar, soaked, panting. Somewhere in the distance the giantess called to him, and he called back. Her voice grew nearer. She urged him to keep singing, and he did:

Lord Malibor stood at the helm
And faced the heaving wave,
And sailed in quest of the dragon
free —

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He heard her occasionally bawling a snatch of the ballad herself, with amiably bawdy embellishments, as she approached through the intricacies of the dragon's interior, and then he looked up and saw by the faint luminous light her enormous form looming above him. He smiled at her. She smiled, and laughed, and he laughed with her, and they clasped one another in a wet, slippery embrace.

But the sight of one who had survived put him in mind again of those who surely had not, and plunged him once more into grief and shame. He turned away, biting at his lip.

"My lord?" she said puzzledly.

"Only we two remain, Lisamon."

"Yes, and praises be for that!"

"But the others — they'd live now, if they hadn't been so stupid as to go chasing across the world with me —"

She caught him by the arm. "My lord, will mourning them bring them back to life, if dead they be?"

"I know all that. But —"

"We are safe. If we have lost our friends, my lord, that's cause for sorrow indeed, but not for guilt. They followed you of their own free choice, eh, my lord? And if their time has come, well, it is because their time has come, and how could that have been otherwise? Will you give up this grief, my lord, and rejoice that we are safe?"

He shrugged. "Safe, yes. And yes, grief brings no one back to life. But how safe are we? How long can we survive in here, Lisamon?"

"Long enough for me to cut us free." She pulled her vibration-sword out of its sheath.

Amazed, he said, "You think you can hack a path to the outside?"

"Why not? I've cut through worse."

"At the first touch of that thing to the dragon's flesh, it'll dive to the bottom of the sea. We're safer in here than trying to swim up from five miles underneath."

"It was said of you that you are an optimist at the darkest time," the warrior-woman declared. "Where's that optimism now? The dragon lives at the surface. It might thrash a bit, but it won't dive. And if we do emerge five miles down? At least it's a quick death. Can you breathe this foul muck forever? Can you wander for long inside a single giant fish?"

Gingerly Lisamon Hultin touched the tip of the vibration-sword to the side wall. The thick moist flesh quivered a bit but did not recoil. "You see? It's got no nerves in here," she said, driving the weapon a little deeper and turning it to excavate a cavity. There were tremors and twitches. She kept digging. "Do you think anyone else was swallowed with us?" she asked.

"Yours was the only voice I've heard."

"And I only yours. Phaugh, what a monster! I tried to hold you as we went overboard, but when we were struck the last time I lost my grip on you. We came to the same place, anyway." She

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had by now opened a hole a foot deep and two feet wide in the side of the dragon's stomach. It seemed hardly to feel the surgery at all. We are like maggots gnawing within it, Valentine thought. Lisamon Hultin said, "While I cut, you see if you can find anyone else. But don't stray too far, hear?"

"I'll be careful."

He chose a route along the stomach wall, groping in the half-darkness, pausing twice to hang on through inrushes of water, and calling out constantly in the hope that someone might reply. No replies came. Cautiously Valentine picked his way back to Lisamon Hultin. Her excavation was enormous now; he saw her deep within the dragon's flesh, still hacking away. Gobbets of severed meat were piled on all sides and thick purplish blood stained her entire body. She was singing cheerfully as she cut.

Lord Malibor stood on the deck
And fought both hard and well.
Thick was the blood that flowed
that day
And great the blows that fell.

"How far do you think it is to the outside?" he asked.

"Half a mile or so."

"Really?"

She laughed. "I suppose ten or fifteen feet. Here, clear the opening behind me. This meat's piling up faster than I can sweep it away."

Feeling like a butcher, and not enjoying the sensation much, Valentine seized the chunks of severed flesh and hauled them back out of the cavity, tossing them as far as he could. He shivered in horror as he saw the fleshy whips of the stomach floor seize the meat and sweep it blithely on toward the digestive pond. Any protein was welcome here, so it seemed.

Deeper, deeper they traveled into the dragon's abdominal wall. Valentine tried to calculate the probable width of it, taking the length of the creature at three hundred feet; but the arithmetic became a muddle. They were working in close quarters and in a foul, hot atmosphere. The blood, the raw meat, the sweat, the narrowness of the cavity — it was hard to imagine a more repellent place.

Valentine looked. "The hole's closing behind us!"

"Beast that lives forever must have tricks of healing," the giantess muttered. She thrust and gouged and hacked. Uneasily Valentine watched new flesh sprouting as if by magic, the wound healing with phenomenal speed. What if they became encapsulated in this opening? Smothered by joining flesh? Lisamon Hultin pretended to be unworried, but he saw her working harder, faster, grunting and moaning, standing with colossal legs planted far apart and shoulders braced. The gash was sealed to their rear, pink, new meat covering the hole, and now it was closing at the sides. Lisamon Hultin slashed and cut with furious intensity,

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and Valentine continued his humbler task of clearing the debris, but she was plainly wearying now, her giant strength visibly diminished, and the hole seemed to be closing almost as fast as she could cut —

"Don't know if I — can keep — it up —" she muttered.

"Give me the sword, then!"

She laughed. "Watch out! You can't do it!" In wild rage she returned to the struggle, bellowing curses at the dragon's flesh as it sprouted around her. It was impossible now to tell where they were; they were burrowing through a realm without landmarks. Her grunts grew sharper and shorter. If this task exhausted her, how could he possibly take her place for long?

"Maybe we should try to go back to the stomach area," he suggested. "Before we're trapped so —"

"No!" she roared. "I think we're getting there! Not so meaty here — tougher, more like muscle — maybe the sheath just under the hide —"

Suddenly sea water poured in on them.

"We're through!" Lisamon Hultin cried exultantly. She turned, seizing Valentine as though he were a doll, and pushed him forward, head-first into the opening in the monster's flank. Her arms were locked in a fierce grip around his hips. She gave one tremendous thrust, and he barely had time to fill his lungs with air before he was projected out through the slippery walls into the cool green embrace of the ocean. Lisamon Hultin emerged just after him, still gripping him tightly, now by his ankle and then by his wrist, and they rocketed upward, upward, rising like corks.

For what seemed like hours they flew toward the surface. Valentine's forehead ached. His ribs soon would burst. His chest was on fire. We are climbing from the very bottom of the sea, he thought bleakly, and we will drown before we reach the air, or our blood will boil the way it does in divers who go too deep in search of the eyestones off Til-omon, or we will be squeezed flat by the pressure, or —

He erupted into clear sweet air, popping nearly the full length of his body out of the water and falling back with a splash. Limply he floated, a straw on the waters, weak, trembling, struggling for breath. Lisamon Hultin floated alongside. The warm beautiful sun blazed wonderfully, straight overhead.

He was alive, and he was unharmed, and he was free of the dragon.

And he bobbed somewhere on the breast of the Inner Sea, a hundred miles from anywhere.

5.

When the first moments of exhaustion had passed, he raised his head and peered about. The dragon was still visible, hump and ridge above the surface, only a few hundred yards away. But it seemed placid and appeared to be swimming slowly in the opposite di-

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rection. Of the *Brangalyn* there was no trace — only scattered timbers over a broad span of ocean. Nor were other survivors in view.

They swam to the nearest timber, a good-sized strip of the hull, and flung themselves across it. For a long while neither of them spoke. At length Valentine said, "And now do we swim to the archipelago? Or should we simply go straight on to the Isle of Sleep?"

"Swimming is hard work, my lord. We could ride on the dragon's back."

"But how guide him?"

"Tug on the wings," she suggested.

"I have my doubts of that."

They were silent again.

Valentine said, "At least in the belly of the dragon we had a fresh catch of fish delivered every few minutes."

"And the inn was large," Lisamon Hultin added. "But poorly ventilated. I think I prefer it here."

"But how long can we drift like this?"

She looked at him strangely. "Do you doubt that we'll be rescued, my lord?"

"It seems reasonably in doubt, yes,"

"It was prophesied to me in a dream from the Lady," said the giantess, "that my death would come in a dry place when I was very old. I am still young and this place is the least dry on all of Majipoor, except perhaps the middle of the Great Sea. Therefore there is nothing to fear. I will not perish here, and neither will you."

"A comforting revelation," Valentine said. "But what will we do?"

"Can you accomplish sendings, my lord?"

"I was Coronal, not King of Dreams."

"But any mind can reach any other, with true intent! Do you think only the King and Lady have such skills? The little wizard Deliamber talked into minds at night, I know that, and Gorzval said he spoke with dragons in his sleep, and you —"

"I am barely myself, Lisamon. Such of my mind as is left to me will send no sendings."

"Try. Reach out across the waters. To the Lady your mother, my lord, or to her people on the Isle, or to the folk of the archipelago. You have the power. I am only a stupid swinger of swords, but you, lord, have a mind that was deemed worthy of the Castle, and now, in the hour of our need —" The giantess seemed transfigured with passion. "Do it, Lord Valentine! Call for help, and help will come!"

Valentine was skeptical. He knew little of the network of dream-communication that seemed to bind this planet together; it did appear that mind often called to mind, and of course there were the Powers of the Isle and of Suvrael supposedly sending directed messages forth by some means of mechanical amplification, but yet, drifting here on a slab of wood in the ocean, body and clothes filthied with the flesh and blood of the giant beast

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that lately had swallowed him, spirit so drained by unending adversity that even his legendary sunny faith in luck and miracles was put to rout — how could he hope to summon aid across such a gulf?

He closed his eyes. He sought to concentrate the energies of his mind in a single point deep within his skull: He imagined a glowing spark of light there, a hidden radiance that he could tap and beam forth. But it was useless. He found himself wondering what toothy creatures might soon be nibbling at his dangling feet. He distracted himself with fears that such messages as he sent forth would reach only as far as the hazy mind of the dragon nearby, that had destroyed the *Brangalyn* and almost all its people, and now might wish to turn back and finish the job. Still, he tried. For all his doubts, he owed it to Lisamon Hultin to make the attempt. He held himself still, barely breathing, seeking intently to do whatever it might be that could send such a message forth.

On and off during the afternoon and early evening he attempted it. Darkness came on quickly, and the water grew strangely luminescent, flickering with a ghostly greenish light. They did not dare sleep at the same time, for fear they might slip from the timber and be lost; so they took turns, and when it was Valentine's turn he fought hard for wakefulness, thinking more than once that he was losing consciousness. Creatures swam near them in the night, making tracks of cold fire through the luminous wavelets.

From time to time Valentine tried the sending-forth of messages again. But he saw no avail in it.

We are lost, he thought.

Toward morning he gave himself up to sleep and had perplexing dreams of dancing eels atop the water. Vaguely, while sleeping, he strived to reach far-off minds with his mind, and then he slipped into a slumber too deep for that.

And woke to the touch of Lisamon Hultin's hand on his shoulder.

"My lord?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her in bewilderment.

"My lord, you may stop making sendings now. We are saved!"

"What?"

"A boat, my lord! See? From the east?"

Wearily he raised his head and followed her gesture. A boat, yes, a small one, coming toward them. Oars flashing in the sunlight. Hallucination, he thought. Delusion. Mirage.

But the boat grew larger against the horizon, and then it was there, and hands were groping for him, hauling him up, and he was sprawled feebly against someone and someone else was putting a flask to his lips, a cool drink, wine, water, he had no way of telling, and they were peeling off his soggy befouled garments and wrapping him in something clean and dry. Strangers, two men and a woman, with great

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manes of tawny hair and clothing of an unfamiliar sort. He heard Lisamon Hultin talking with them, but the words were blurred and indistinct, and he made no attempt to discern their meaning. Had he conjured up these rescuers with his mental broadcast, then? Angels, were they? Spirits? Valentine settled back, hardly caring, totally spent. He thought hazily of drawing Lisamon Hultin aside and telling her to make no mention of his true identity, but he lacked even the energy for that and hoped she would have sense enough not to compound absurdity with absurdity by saying any such thing. "He is Coronal of Majipoor in disguise, yes, and the dragon swallowed us both but we were able to cut ourselves free, and —" Yes. Certainly that would have the ring of unanswerable truth to these people. Valentine smiled faintly and gave himself up to a dreamless sleep.

When he woke he was in a pleasant sunlit room, facing out on a broad golden beach, and Carabella was looking down at him with an expression of grave concern.

"My lord?" she said softly. "Do you hear me?"

"Is this a dream?"

"This is the island of Mardigile in the archipelago," she told him. "You were picked up yesterday, drifting in the ocean, along with the giantess. These islanders are fisherfolk, who have been scouting the sea for survivors since the ship went down."

"Who else lives?" Valentine asked quickly.

"Deliamber and Zalzan Gibor are here with me. The Mardigile folk say that Khun and Shanamir and some Skandars — I don't know if they're ours — were picked up by boats from a neighboring island. Some of the dragon-hunters escaped in their own boats and have reached the islands too."

"And Sleet? What of Sleet?"

Carabella showed, for a flashing moment, a look of fear. "I have no news of Sleet," she said. "But the rescue is continuing. He may be safe on one of these islands. There are dozens hereabouts. The Divine has preserved us so far: we will not be cast aside now." She laughed lightly. "Lisamon Hultin has told a wonderful story of how you both were swallowed by the great dragon and hacked your way out with the vibration-sword. The islanders love it. They think it's the most splendid fable since the tale of Lord Stiamot and the —"

"It happened," Valentine said.

"My lord?"

"The dragon. Swallowing us. She tells the truth."

Carabella giggled. "When I first learned in dreams of your real self, I believed that. But when you tell me —"

"Within the dragon," Valentine said earnestly, "there were great pillars holding up the vault of the stomach, and an opening at one end through

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which sea water came rushing every few minutes, and with it came fish that were pushed by little whips toward a greenish pond where they were digested, and where the giantess and I would have been digested too, if we were less lucky. Did she tell you that? And do you think we spent our time out there inventing a fable to amuse you all?"

Eyes wide, Carabella said, "She told the same story, yes. But we thought —"

"It's true, Carabella."

"Then it is a miracle of the Divine, and you will be famous in all time to come!"

"I'm already going to be famous," said Valentine acidly, "as the Coronal who lost his throne and took up juggling for lack of royal occupation. That will win me a place in the ballads alongside the Pontifex Arioc who made himself Lady of the Isle. The dragon, now, that only embellishes the legend I'm creating around myself." His expression changed suddenly. "You've told none of these people who I am, I hope?"

"Not a word, my lord."

"Good. Keep it that way. They have enough difficult things to believe about us, as it is."

An islander, slim and tanned and with the great sweep of fair hair that seemed the universal style here, brought Valentine a tray of food: some clear soup, a tender piece of baked fish, triangular wedges of a fruit with dark indigo flesh dotted with tiny scarlet seeds. Valentine found himself ravenously hungry.

Afterward he strolled with Carabella on the beach outside his cottage. "Once again I thought you were lost to me forever," he said softly. "I thought I would never hear your voice again."

"Do I matter that much to you?"

"More than I could ever tell you."

She smiled sadly. "Such pretty words, eh, Valentine? For so I call you, *Valentine*, but you are *Lord* Valentine, and how many fancy women do you have, Lord Valentine, waiting for you on Castle Mount?"

He had now and then been thinking the same thing himself. Had he a lover there? Many of them? An intended bride, even? So much of his past was still shrouded. And if he reached the Castle, and if a woman who had waited for him came forth to him —

"No," he said. "You are mine, Carabella, and I am yours, and whatever may have been in the past — if ever anything was — lies in the past now. I have a different face these days. I have a different soul."

She looked skeptical but did not challenge what he had said, and he lightly kissed her frown away.

"Sing to me," he said. "The song you sang under the bush in Pidruid, the festival-night — *Not all the wealth of Castle Mount*, it went, *Is worth my love to me.* Eh?"

"I know another much like it," she she said and took up the pocket-harp from her hip:

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My love has donned a pilgrim's robe
Afar across the sea
My love has gone to the isle of Sleep
Across the dreaming sea.

Sweet my love, and fair as dawn
Afar across the sea
Lost my love to an island tall
Across the dreaming sea.

Lady kind of the distant Isle
Afar across the sea
Fill my dreams with my lover's smile
Across the dreaming sea.

"A different sort of song, that one," Valentine said. "A sadder one. Sing me that other, love."

"Another time."

"Please. This is a time of joy, of reuniting, Carabella. Please."

She smiled and sighed and took up the harp again.

My love is fair as is the spring,
As gentle as the night,
My love is sweet as stolen fruit —

Yes, he thought. Yes, that one was better. He let his hand rest tenderly on the nape of her neck and stroked it as they walked along the beach. It was astonishingly beautiful here, warm and peaceful. Birds of fifty hues perched in the tortuous-limbed little trees of the shore; and a crystalline sea, surfless, transparent, lapped at the fine sand. The air was soft and mild, fragrant with the perfumes of unknown blossoms. From far away came the sound of laughter and of a gay, bright, tinkling music. How tempting it was, Valentine thought, to abandon all fantasies of Castle Mount and settle forever on Mardigile, and go out at dawn on a fishing-boat for the catch, and spend the rest of each day frolicking in the hot sunshine.

But there would be no such abdications for him. In the afternoon Zalzan Gibor and Autifon Deliamber, both healthy and well rested after their ordeals at sea, came to call on him, and soon they were talking of ways and means to continue the journey.

Zalzan Gibor, parsimonious as always, had had the money-pouch on him when the *Brangalyn* went down, and so at least half their treasury had survived, even if Shanamir had lost the rest. The Skandar laid out the glittering coins. "With this," he said, "we can hire these fisherfolk to convey us to the Isle. I have spoken with our hosts. This archipelago is nine hundred miles in length, and numbers three thousand islands, more than eight hundred of them inhabited. No one here wishes to journey all the way to the Isle, but for a few royals we can hire a large trimaran that will carry us to Rodamaunt Graun near the midpoint of the chain, and there we can probably find transport the rest of the way."

"When can we leave?" Valentine asked.

"As soon," said Deliamber, "as we are reunited once more. I am told that

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several of our people are on their way across from the nearby isle of Burbont at this moment."

"Which ones?"

"Khun, Vinorkis, and Shanamir," Zalzan Gibor answered, "and my brothers Erfon and Rovorn. With them is Captain Gorzval. Gibor Haern is lost at sea — I saw him perish, struck by a timber and sent under — and of Sleet there is no news."

Valentine touched the Skandar's shaggy forearm. "I grieve for your latest loss."

Zalzan Gibor's feelings seemed well under control. "Let us rather rejoice that some of us still live, my lord," he said quietly.

In early afternoon a boat from Burbont brought the other survivors. There was a small dock not far from his beachfront cottage, and Valentine went down to greet them. There were embraces all around; and then Valentine turned to Gorzval, who stood apart, looking numb and bewildered, rubbing at the stump of his severed hand. The dragon-captain seemed in shock. Valentine would have put his arms around the hapless man, but the instant he approached Gorzval sank to his knees in the sand and touched his forehead to the ground and stayed there, trembling, arms outspread in the starburst gesture. "My lord —" he whispered harshly. "My lord —"

Valentine, displeased, looked around. "Who has been talking?"

Silence a moment. Then Shanamir, a bit frightened, said, "I, my lord. I meant no harm. The Skandar seemed so injured by the loss of his ship — I thought to console him by telling him who his passenger had been, that he had become part of the history of Majipoor by giving you voyage. This was before we knew that you had survived the wreck." The boy's lip quivered. "My lord, I meant no harm by it!"

Valentine nodded. "And no harm was done. I forgive you. Gorzval?"

The cowering dragon-captain remained huddled at Valentine's feet.

"Look up, Gorzval. I can't talk to you this way."

"My lord?"

"Get to your feet."

"My lord —"

"Please, Gorzval. Get up!"

The Skandar, amazed, peered at Valentine and said, "*Please*, you say? *Please?*"

Valentine laughed. "I've forgotten the habits of power, I suppose. All right: up! I command it!"

Shakily Gorzval rose. He was a miserable sight, this little three-handed Skandar, his fur matted, his eyes bloodshot, his expression downcast.

Valentine said, "I brought foul luck upon you, and you had no need of more of that. Accept my apologies; and if fortune begins to smile more kindly on me, I will repair the harm you have suffered, some day. I promise you that. What will you do now? Gather your crew and return to Piliplok?"

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Gorzval shook his head pathetically. "I could never go there again. I have no ship, I have no reputation, I have no money. I have lost everything and it can never be regained. My people were released of their indentures when the *Brangalyn* sank. I am alone now. I am ruined."

"Come with us to the Isle of the Lady, then, Gorzval."

"My lord?"

"You can't stay here. I think these islanders prefer not to take in settlers, and this is no climate for a Skandar, anyway. Nor can a dragon-hunter become a fisherman, I think, without knowing pain every time he casts his nets. Come with us. If we get no farther than the Isle, you may find peace there in the service of the Lady; and if we continue on our quest, there will be honor for you as we make the ascent of Castle Mount. What do you say, Gorzval?"

"It frightens me to be near you, my lord."

"Am I so terrifying? Do I have a dragon's mouth? Do you see these people green-faced with fear?"

"There is a difference," said Carabella gently. "We knew you before we knew who you were. Gorzval confronts you in sudden revelation. He's had no chance to discover that a Power may also be an ordinary mortal being."

"He'll discover it now," Valentine replied, clapping the Skandar on his shoulder. To Zalzan Gibor he said, "No one can replace the brothers you have lost. But at least I give you another companion of your own kind. And now let's make arrangements for departure, eh? The Isle is still many days' journey away."

Within an hour Zalzan Gibor had secured an island craft to carry them eastward. They would leave in the morning. That evening the hospitable islanders provided them with a splendid feast, cool green wines and sleek sweet fruits and fine fresh sea-dragon flesh. That last made Valentine queasy, and he would have pushed it away, but he saw Lisamon Hultin shoveling it in as though it were the last meal she would eat, without any trace of dismay. As an exercise in self-discipline he decided to force a morsel into his own throat and found the flavor so irresistible that he renounced on the spot any discomfort that sea-dragons might arouse in his mind. As they ate, sunset came, at an early hour here in the tropics, and an extraordinary one it was, streaking the sky with rich throbbing tones of amber and violet and magenta and gold. Surely these were blessed islands, Valentine thought, extraordinarily joyous places even on a world where most places were happy ones and most lives were fulfilled ones. The population seemed generally homogeneous, handsome long-legged folk of human blood with thick unshorn golden hair and smooth honey-colored skin, though there was a scattering of Vroons and even

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Ghayrogs among them, and Deliamber said that other islands in the chain had peoples of different stocks. According to Deliamber, who had been mingling freely since his rescue, the islands were largely out of touch with the mainland continents and went their way in a world of their own, ignorant of matters of high destiny in the greater world. When Valentine asked one of his hosts if Lord Valentine the Coronal had happened to pass this way on his recent journey to Zimroel, the woman gave him a blank look and said ingenuously, "Is the Coronal not Lord Voriax?"

"Dead two years or more, I hear," one of the other islanders declared, and it seemed to come as news to most of the people at the table.

Valentine shared his cottage with Carabella that night. They stood together a long while on the veranda, eyes fixed on the brilliant white track of moonlight gleaming out across the sea toward distant Piliplok. He thought of the sea-dragons grazing in that sea, and of the monster in whose belly he had made that dreamlike sojourn, and, with pain, of his two lost comrades Gibor Haern and Sleet, who might be deep in the sea now, one certainly and the other perhaps. So great a journey, he thought, remembering Pidruid, Dulorn, Mazadone, Ilirivoyne, Ni-moya, remembering the flight through the forest, the turbulence of the Steiche, the coldness of the Piliplok dragon-captains, the look of the dragon as it bore down on poor Gorzval's doomed vessel. So great a journey, so many thousands of miles, and so many miles yet to cover before he could begin to answer the questions that flooded his soul.

Carabella nestled close beside him, silent. Her attitude toward him was constantly evolving, and had become a mixture of awe and love, of deference and irreverence, for she accepted and respected him as true Coronal, and yet remembered his innocence, his ignorance, his naivete, qualities which had not yet left him. And clearly she feared she would lose him when he had again come into his own. Simply on the level of dealing daily with the world, she was far more competent than he, far more experienced, and that colored her view of him, making her see him as terrifying and childlike both at once. He understood that and took no issue with it, for, although fragments of his earlier self and princely education returned to him almost daily, and he grew more accustomed to the postures of command, most of his former identity still was inaccessible to him and he was, in large part, still Valentine the easy-going wanderer, Valentine the innocent, Valentine the juggler. That darker figure, the Lord Valentine he once had been, that he might someday be again, was a hidden substratum in his spirit, rarely operative but never to be ignored. He thought that Carabella was making the best of a difficult position.

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She said at last, "What are you thinking of, Valentine?"

"Sleet. I miss that tough little man."

"He'll turn up. We'll find him four islands from here."

"I hope so," he said. He cupped his arm about her shoulders. "I think also of all that has happened, and all that will happen. I move as though through a world of dreams, Carabella."

"Who can tell, really, what is the dream and what is not? We move as the Divine instructs us, and we ask no questions, because there are no answers. Do you know what I mean? There are questions and there are answers, of course, I can tell you what day this is, and what we had for dinner, and how this island is called, if you ask me, but there are no *questions*, there are no *answers*."

"So I believe also," Valentine said.

6.

Zalzan Gibor had hired one of the grandest fishing-boats on the island, a marvelous turquoise trimaran named *Pride of Mardigile*, It was a splendid fifty-footer rising nobly on its three sleek hulls, and its sails, spotless and dazzling in the morning sunlight, bore bright vermilion edging that gave the craft a festive, jubilant air. Their captain was a man past middle years, one of the most prosperous fishermen of the island, Grigitor by name, tall and sturdy, with hair down to his waist and skin so vigorous it looked to have been oiled; he was one of those who had rescued Deliamber and Zalzan Gibor, when the first alarms of a sinking ship had reached the island. He had a crew of five, his sons and daughters, all strapping and handsome after his image.

The route of the voyage lay first toward Burbont, the nearest island, less than half an hour's sail away, and then into an open channel of shallow greenish water that linked the two outermost islands to the rest. The sea bottom here was of clean white sand, and sunlight penetrated easily to it, setting off patterns of sparkling coruscations that revealed the undersea dwellers, the rock-toads and the twitch-crabs and the big-leg lobsters, and the gaudy-hued multitudes of fish, and the sinister, lurking sand-eels. Once even a small sea-dragon flitted by, far too close to land for its own good and obviously confused; one of Grigitor's daughters urged that they go after it, but he shook the notion off, saying that their responsibility was to get their passengers swiftly to Rodamaunt Graun.

All morning they sailed, passing three more islands — Richelure, Grialon, Voniaire, said their captain — and at noon they dropped anchor for lunch. Two of Grigitor's children went over the side to hunt, moving like magnificent animals, naked in the brilliant water, quickly spearing crustaceans and fish with rarely a missed thrust.

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Grigitor himself prepared the meal, cubes of raw white flesh marinated in a spicy sauce and washed down with cheering pungent green wine. Deliamber withdrew after eating only a little, and perched himself on the tip of one of the outer hulls, staring intently to the north. After a while Valentine noticed, and would have gone to him, but Carabella caught him by the wrist.

"He is in trance," she said. "Let him be."

They delayed their departure after lunch by some minutes, until the little Vroon descended from his place and rejoined them. The wizard looked pleased.

"I have cast my mind forth," he announced, "and I bring you good news. Sleet lives!"

"Good news indeed!" Valentine cried. "Where is he?"

"An island in that group," said Deliamber, gesturing vaguely with a cluster of tentacles. "He is with several of Gorzval's people who escaped by boat from the disaster."

Grigitor said, "Tell me which island, and we'll make for it."

"It has the shape of a circle, with an opening at one side and a body of water at its center. The people are dark-skinned and wear their hair in long ringlets, with jewels in their earlobes."

"Kangrisorn," said one of Grigitor's daughters instantly.

Her father nodded. "Kangrisorn it is," he said. "Pull up anchor!"

Kangrisorn lay an hour to the windward, somewhat off the route Grigitor had charted. It was one of half a dozen small sandy atolls, mere rings of upraised reef surrounding little lagoons, and it must have been uncommon for people of Mardigile to visit it, for long before the trimaran had entered the harbor, children of Kangrisorn were flocking out in boats to view the strangers. They were as dark as the Mardigilese were golden, and just as beautiful in their solemn way, with shining white teeth and hair so black it seemed almost blue. With much laughter and waving of arms they guided the trimaran through the entrance to the lagoon, and there, squatting at the edge of the water, was Sleet indeed, looking sunburned and a bit ragged but mainly intact. He was juggling five or six globes of bleached white coral for an audience that consisted of a few dozen islanders and five members of Gorzval's crew, four humans and a Hjort.

Gorzval seemed apprehensive at encountering his erstwhile employees. He had begun to recover his spirits during the morning's voyage, but now he grew tense and withdrawn as the trimaran entered the lagoon. Carabella was the first off, splashing through the shallow water to embrace Sleet; Valentine followed close behind. But Gorzval lurked to the rear, eyes lowered.

"How did you find us?" Sleet asked.

Valentine indicated Deliamber.

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"Sorcery. How else? Are you well?"

"I thought I'd die of seasickness getting here, but I've had a day or two to recover." With a shudder he said, "And you? I saw you sucked under, and believed all was over."

"So it seemed," said Valentine. "A strange story, which I'll tell you another time. We are all together again, eh, Sleet? All but Gibor Haern," he added mournfully, "who perished in the wreck. But we've taken on Gorzval as one of our companions. Come forward, Gorzval! Aren't you pleased to see your men again?"

Gorzval muttered something indistinct and looked between Valentine and the others, meeting no one's eyes. Valentine comprehended the situation and turned to the crew people, meaning to ask them to hold no ill-will toward the former captain for a disaster far beyond mortal control. He was taken aback to discover the five of them groveling at his feet.

Sleet said, abashed, "I thought you were dead, my lord. I couldn't resist telling them the tale."

"I see," said Valentine, "that the news is apt to spread more rapidly than I wish, no matter how solemnly I swear you all to silence. Well, it's pardonable, Sleet." To the others he said, "Up. Up. This crawling in the sand does none of us any good."

They rose. Their contempt for Gorzval was impossible for them to hide, but it was overshadowed by the astonishment they felt at being in the presence of the Coronal. Of the five, Valentine quickly learned, two — the Hjort and one of the humans — chose to remain on Kangrisorn in the hope of finding, eventually, some way to return to Piliplok and resume their trade. The other three begged to accompany him on his pilgrimage.

So now there were more than a dozen in the rapidly expanding band. The new ones were two women, Pandelon and Cordeine, a carpenter and a sailmender, and a man, Thesme, one of the winchwinders. Valentine bade them be welcome and accepted pledges of allegiance from them, a ceremony that stirred vague discomfort in him. Yet he was growing accustomed to taking on these trappings of rank.

Grigitor and his children had paid no attention to the kneelings and handkissings among the passengers. Just as well: until he had conferred with the Lady, Valentine wished not to spread news across the world of his return to self-awareness. He was still uncertain of his strategy and unsure of his powers. Besides, if he advertised his existence he might draw the attention of the present Coronal, who was not likely to stay his hand if he discovered that a pretender was journeying toward Castle Mount.

The trimaran resumed its voyage. From isle to golden isle it went, staying well within the coastal channels and only occasionally venturing into deeper, bluer waters. Past Lormanar

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and Climidole they sailed, and Secundail, Blayhar Strand, Diluvione, Garhuven, and Wiswis Keep; past Gloyt, Quile, Shurn, and Fruil; past Dawnbreak, Nissemhold, Sheffitak, and Thiaquil; past Roazen and Piplinat; and past the great crescent sand-spit known as Damozal. They stopped at the island of Sungyve for fresh water, at Musorn for fruit and leafy vegetables, at Cadibyre for casks of the young pink wine of that island. And after many days of traveling through these small sun-blessed places they pulled into the spacious harbor of Rodamaunt Graun.

This was a large lush island of mountainous origin, surrounded by black volcanic beaches and equipped along its southern shore with a splendid natural breakwater. Rodamaunt Graun was dominant in the archipelago, by far the largest in the chain, with a population, so Grigitor asserted, of five and a half million. Most of those seemed clustered in the twin cities that spread out like wings from both sides of the harbor, but the flanks of the island's looming central peak were also well populated, with dwellings of rattan and skupik-wood rising in neat ranks almost to midpoint. Above the last line of houses the slopes were thickly covered with jungle, and at the highest level rose a plume of thin white smoke, for Rodamaunt Graun was an active volcano. The last eruption, said Grigitor, had occurred less than fifty years before. But that was hard to believe, when one looked at the impeccable houses and the unbroken forest growth above them.

Here the *Pride of Mardigile* would turn back for home, but Grigitor arranged for the voyagers to shift to a trimaran even more noble, the *Rodamaunt Queen*, which would carry them to the Isle of Sleep. Her skipper was one Namurinta, a woman of regal poise and bearing, with long straight hair as white as Sleet's and a youthful, unlined face. Her manner was fastidious and quizzical: she studied her assortment of passengers closely, as if trying to determine what pull had drawn such a mixture into an off-season pilgrimage, but she said only, "If you are refused at the Isle, I will return you to Rodamaunt Graun, but there will be extra costs for your upkeep in that event."

"Does the Isle often refuse pilgrims?" Valentine asked.

"Not when they come at the proper time. But the pilgrim-ships, as I suppose you know, don't sail in autumn. There may not be facilities ready for receiving you."

"We've come this far with only minor difficulties," said Valentine jauntily. He heard Carabella snicker and Sleet make stagy coughing sounds. "I feel confident," he went on, "that we'll meet no obstacles greater than those we've already encountered."

"I admire your determination," Namurinta said, and signaled to her crew to prepare for departure.

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The archipelago in its eastern half hooked somewhat to the north, and the islands here were generally unlike Mardigile and its neighbors, being mainly the tops of a submerged mountain chain, and not flat coral-based platforms. Studying Namurinta's charts, Valentine concluded that this part of the archipelago had once been a long tail of a peninsula jutting out of the southwest corner of the Isle of Sleep, but had been swallowed by some rising of the Inner Sea in ancient times. Only the tallest peaks had remained above water, and between the easternmost island of the archipelago and the coast of the Isle there now lay some hundreds of miles of open sea — a formidable journey for a trimaran, even so well equipped a trimaran as Namurinta's.

But the voyage was uneventful. They stopped at four ports — Hellirache, Sempifiore, Dimmid, and Guadeloom — for water and victuals, and sailed on serenely past Rodamaunt Ounze, the last island of the archipelago, and entered Ungehoyer Channel, which separated the archipelago from the Isle of Sleep. This was a broad but shallow seaway, richly endowed with marine life and heavily fished by the island folk, all but the easternmost hundred miles, which formed part of the holy perimeter of the Isle. In these waters were monsters of a harmless kind, great balloon-shaped creatures known as volevants that anchored themselves to deep rocks and lived by filtering plankton through their gills; these creatures excreted a constant stream of nutrient matter, which sustained the enormous population of lifeforms about them. Valentine saw dozens of volevants in the next few days: swollen globular sacks of a deep carmine hue, fifty to eighty feet across at their upper ends, plainly visible just a few feet below the calm surface. They bore dark semicircular markings on their skins, which Valentine imagined were eyes and noses and lips, so that he saw faces peering gravely up from the water, and it seemed to him that the volevants were beings of the deepest melancholy, philosophers of weight and wisdom reflecting eternally on the ebb and flow of the tides. "They sadden me," he told Carabella. "Forever hovering there, tied by their tails to hidden boulders, swaying slowly as the currents move them. How thoughtful they are!"

"Thoughtful! They're only primitive gasbags, no cleverer than a sponge!"

"But look carefully at them, Carabella. They want to fly, to soar — they look up at the sky, at the whole world of the air, and long to encounter it, but all they can do is hang below the waves, and sway, and fill themselves with invisible organisms. Just in front of their faces lies another world, and it would be death to them to enter it. Are you untouched by that?"

"Silly," Carabella said.

On the second day in the channel

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the *Rodamaunt Queen* came upon five fishing-boats that had uprooted a volevant, brought it to the surface, and slit it into gores; they clustered about the huge outspread skin of it, cutting it into smaller sections and stacking them like hides on their decks. Valentine was appalled. When I am Coronal again, he thought, I will prohibit the killing of these creatures, and then he looked at the thought in amazement, asking himself if it was his intention to promulgate laws on the basis of sympathies alone, without study of the facts. He asked Namurinta what use was made of volevant-skin.

"Medicinal," she replied. "For the comfort of the very old, when their blood flows sluggishly. One of them provides enough of the drug for all the islands for a year or more: what you see is a rare event."

When I am Coronal again, Valentine resolved, I will reserve judgment until I am in full possession of the truth, if such a thing is ever possible.

Nevertheless, the imagined solemn profundity of the volevants haunted him with strange emotions, and he was relieved to pass beyond their zone and into the cool blue waters that bordered the Isle of Sleep.

7.

The Isle now lay clearly in view to the east, growing perceptibly larger every hour. Valentine had seen it only in dreams and fantasies, and those based on nothing but his own imaginings and whatever residue of remembered reality still encrusted his mind; and he was not at all prepared for the actuality of the place.

It was immense. That should not have been surprising on a planet itself gigantic, and where so many things were in a scale with the planetary dimensions. But Valentine had misled himself into thinking an island necessarily was something of convenient and accessible scope. He had expected something perhaps two or three times as big as Rodamaunt Graun, which was foolishness: the Isle of Sleep, he saw now, spanned the entire horizon and looked as large from this distance as had the coast of Zimroel when they were a day or two out of Piliplok. An island it was, but by that token so too were Zimroel and Alhanroel and Suvrael; and the only reason the Isle was not called a continent, as were they, was that they were colossal, and the Isle merely very big.

The Isle too was dazzling. Like the promontory across the mouth of the river from Piliplok, it was ramparted by cliffs of pure white chalk that blazed brilliantly in the afternoon sunlight. They formed a wall hundreds of feet high and perhaps hundreds of miles in length across the western face of the Isle. Atop that wall spread a dark green crown of forest, and, so it seemed, there was a second wall of chalk inland at a higher elevation, topped also

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by forest, and then a third yet farther from the sea, so that the Isle from this side gave an appearance of tier upon tier of brightness, rising to some unknown and perhaps inaccessible central fastness. He had heard of the Terraces of the Isle, which he gathered were artificial constructs of great age, symbolic markers of the ascent toward initiation. But the island itself seemed a place of terraces, natural ones, that enhanced its mystery. Small wonder that this place had become the abode of the sacred on Majipoor.

Namurinta said, pointing, "That notch in the cliff is Taleis, where the pilgrim-ships land. It's one of the Isle's two harbors; the other's Numinor, over around Alhanroel side. But you must know all this, being pilgrims."

"We have had little time to study," said Valentine. "This pilgrimage came on us suddenly."

"Will you pass the rest of your lives here in the service of the Lady?" she asked.

"In the service of the Lady, yes," Valentine said. "But I think not here. The Isle is only a way station for some of us, on a much greater journey."

Namurinta looked puzzled at that, but she asked no further questions.

The wind blew briskly from the southwest here and carried the *Rodamaunt Queen* easily and swiftly toward Taleis. Soon the great chalk wall altogether filled the view, and the opening in it was revealed as no mere notch, but a harbor of heroic size, a great gouge in the whiteness. With sails full the trimaran entered. Valentine, in the bow, hair streaming in the breeze, was awestruck by the scope of the place, for within the sharp-angled V that was Taleis the cliffs descended almost vertically toward the water from a height of a mile or more, and at their base was a wide flat strip of land bordered by a broad white beach. At one side were wharfs and piers and docks, everything dwarfed by the scale of this gigantic amphitheater. It was hard to imagine how one could get from this port at the foot of the cliffs to the interior of the island: the place was a natural fortress.

And it was silent. There were no vessels in the harbor and an eerie echoing quietness prevailed, against which the sound of the wind or the screeching of an occasional gull took on magnified significance.

"Is there anyone here?" Sleet asked. "Who will greet us?"

Carabella closed her eyes. "To have to go around to the Numinor side now — worse, to return to the archipelago —"

"No," Deliamber said. "We will be met. Fear nothing."

The trimaran glided toward the shore and came to rest at a vacant pier. The grandeur of the surroundings was overwhelming here, deep in the V of the harbor, with the cliffs rising so high they seemed to be on the verge of toppling. A crewman made the boat fast and they stepped forth.

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Deliamber's confidence seemed misplaced. There was no one here. Everything remained still, a silence so mighty that Valentine wanted to put his hands to his ears to shut it out. They waited. They exchanged uncertain glances.

"Let's explore," he said finally. "Lisamon, Khun, Zalzan Gibor — examine the buildings to our left. Sleet, Deliamber, Vinorkis, Shanamir — down that way. You, Pandelon, Thesme, Rovorn — to that curve of the beach, and look beyond it. Gorzval, Erfon —"

Valentine, with Carabella and the sailmender Cordeine, went straight ahead, to the foot of the titanic chalk cliff. Some sort of pathway began there and angled upward at an impossible slope, close to vertical, toward the upper reaches of the cliff, where it vanished between two white spires. Climbing that path would require the agility of a forest-brother and the gall of a tandy-prancer, Valentine decided. Yet no other place of exit from the beach was apparent. He peered into the small wooden shack at the base of the path and found nothing but a few floater-sleds, presumably used in riding the path. He hauled one out, set it on the thrusting-pad at ground level, and mounted it; but he saw no way of activating it. Nor did he feel much enthusiasm for making that giddy vertical ascent by hands and feet.

Puzzled, he returned to the pier. Most of the others had come back already. "The place is deserted," said Sleet.

Valentine looked toward Namurinta. "How long would it take you to carry us around to the Alhanroel side?"

"To Numinor? Weeks. But I would not go there."

"We have money," said Zalzan Gibor.

She looked indifferent. "My trade is fishing. The time of harvest for the thorn-fish is at hand. If I take you to Numinor, I will miss it, and half the gissoon season as well. You could not recompense me for that."

The Skandar produced a five-royal piece as though by its glitter alone he could change the captain's mind. But she shook it away.

"For half of what you paid me to bring you from Rodamaunt Graun to here, I'll return you to Rodamaunt Graun, but that's the best I can do for you. In a few months the pilgrim-ships will be sailing again and this harbor will come to life, and then, if you wish, I'll bring you here again for the same half-fee. However you decide, I am at your service. But I will sail from this place before it grows dark, and not for Numinor."

Valentine considered the situation. This was a greater nuisance than being swallowed by the sea-dragon, for he had quickly enough been set free from that, but this unexpected obstacle threatened to delay him well into winter, or even beyond, and all this

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while Dominin Barjazid ruled at Castle Mount, new laws went forth, history was altered, the usurper consolidated his position. But what, then? He glanced at Deliamber, but the wizard, though he looked bland and untroubled, offered no suggestions. They could not climb this wall. They could not fly it. They could not leap in mighty bounds to the unreachable, infinitely desirable, forest groves that cloaked its shoulders. Back to Rodamaunt Graun, then?

"Will you wait with us here a day?" Valentine asked. "For an additional fee, that is? Possibly in the morning we'll find someone who —"

"I am far from Rodamaunt Graun," Namurinta replied. "I yearn to see its shores again. Waiting here another hour, even, would gain you nothing and me even less. The season is wrong; the people of the Lady expect no one to arrive at Taleis, and will not be here."

Shanamir tugged lightly at Valentine's sleeve. "You are Coronal of Majipoor," the boy whispered. "*Command* her to wait! Reveal yourself and force her to her knees!"

Smiling, Valentine said softly, "I think the trick might not work. I've left my crown elsewhere."

"Then have Deliamber witch her into yielding!"

That was a possibility. But Valentine disliked it: Namurinta had taken them on in good faith, and by rights was free to leave, and probably was correct that waiting here another day or two or three was pointless. Compelling her to yield by Deliamber's powers was distasteful to him. On the other hand —

"Lord Valentine!" a woman's voice called, far away. "Here! Come!"

He looked toward the far end of the harbor. It was Pandelon, Gorzval's carpenter, who had gone with Thesme and Rovorn to inspect what lay around the curve. She was waving, beckoning. He sprinted down toward her, the others following after a moment.

When he reached her she led him through the shallow water around a jutting fold of rock that concealed a much smaller beach. There he saw a single-story structure of pink sandstone that bore the triangle-within-triangle emblem of the Lady and was perhaps some sort of shrine. In front of it was a garden of flowering shrubs arranged in symmetrical patterns of red, blue, orange, and yellow blossoms. Two gardeners, a man and a woman, were tending it. They looked up without interest as Valentine approached. Awkwardly he made the sign of the Lady at them, and they returned it more adeptly.

He said, "We are pilgrims and need to be told the way to the terraces."

"You come out of season," the woman said. Her face was wide and pale, with a sprinkling of pale freckles on it. There was nothing friendly in her voice.

"Because of our eagerness to enter into the Lady's service."

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The woman shrugged and returned to her weeding. The man, a thick-muscled, short-statured person with thinning gray hair, said, "You should have gone to Numinor at this time of year."

"We came from Zimroel."

That produced a minor flicker of attention. "Through the dragon-winds? You must have had a difficult crossing."

"There were some troublesome moments," Valentine said, "but they lie behind us now. We feel only joy at having reached this Isle at last."

"The Lady will comfort you," said the man indifferently and began to work with a pruning shears.

After a moment of silence that grew swiftly dismaying, Valentine said, "And the way to the terraces?"

The freckled woman said, "You won't be able to operate it."

"But will you help us?"

Silence again.

Valentine said, "It would be only a moment, and then we'd disturb you no more. Show us the way."

"We have our duties here," said the balding man.

Valentine moistened his lips. This was leading nowhere; and, for all he knew, Namurinta had left the other beach five minutes ago and was on her way back to Rodamaunt Graun, marooning them. He looked to Deliamber. Some wizardly compulsion might be in order. Deliamber ignored the hint. Valentine moved toward him and murmured, "Touch your tentacles to them and inspire them to cooperate."

"I think my sorceries are of little value on this holy isle," said Deliamber. "Try wizardries of your own."

"I have none!"

"Try," said the Vroon.

Valentine confronted the gardeners once again. I am Coronal of Majipoor, he told himself, and I am the son of the Lady whom these two worship and serve. It was impossible to say any of that to the gardeners, but he could transmit it, perhaps, through sheer force of soul. He stood tall and moved toward the center of his being, as he would have done if he were preparing to juggle before the most critical of audiences, and he smiled a smile so warm it might have opened buds on the branches of the flowering shrubs, and after a moment the gardeners, looking up from their work, saw it and showed an unmistakable response, a reaction of surprise, bewilderment, and — submission. He bathed them in glowing love. "We have come thousands of miles," he said gently, "to give ourselves up to the peace of the Lady, and we beg you, in the name of the Divine that we both serve, to assist us on our pathway, for our need is great and we are weary of wandering."

They blinked, as if the sun had emerged from behind a gray cloud.

"We have our tasks," said the woman lamely.

"We are not supposed to ascend

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until the garden is cared for," the man said, almost in a mumble.

"The garden thrives," said Valentine, "and will thrive without your aid for a few hours today. Help us, before the darkness comes. We ask only that you point us on our way, and I tell you that the Lady will reward you for it."

The gardeners looked troubled. They glanced at one another and then toward the sky, as though to see how late it was. Frowning, they rose and brushed the soft sandy soil from their knees and, like sleepwalkers, moved to the water's edge and out into the light surf and around the point to the greater beach and down toward the foot of the cliff where that vertical path began its skyward climb.

Namurinta was still there, but she was nearly ready for departure. Valentine went to her.

"For your aid we thank you deeply," he said.

"You are staying?"

"We have found a way to the terraces."

She smiled in unfeigned pleasure. "I was not eager to abandon you, but Rodamaunt Graun was calling me. I wish you well as you make your pilgrimage."

"And I wish you a safe voyage home."

He turned away.

"One thing," the captain said.

"Yes?"

"When the woman called to you from down there," she said, "she hailed you as *Lord* Valentine. What was the meaning of that?"

"A joke," said Valentine, "only a joke."

"Lord Valentine is how the new Coronal is named, so I have been told, the one that rules since a year or two past."

"Yes," Valentine said. "But he is a dark-haired man. It was only a joke, a play on names, for I am Valentine too. A safe journey, Namurinta."

"A fruitful pilgrimage, Valentine."

He walked toward the cliff. The gardeners had taken several of the floater-sleds from the shack and had placed them in riding sequence on the thrusting-pad. Silently they gestured the travelers aboard. Valentine mounted the first sled, with Carabella, Deliamber, Shanamir, and Khun. The female gardener went into the shack, where, it seemed, the controls of the floaters must be located, for an instant afterward the sled drifted free of the pad and began to glide in the dizzying, terrifying ascent of the towering white cliff.

8.

"You have come," said the acolyte Talinot Esulde, "to the Terrace of Assessment. Here you will be weighed in the balance. When it is time to move onward, your path takes you to the Terrace of Inception, and then to the Terrace of Mirrors, where you will

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confront yourself. If what you see is satisfactory to you and to your guides, you move inward to Second Cliff, where another group of terraces awaits you. And so you proceed until the Terrace of Adoration, where, if the favor of the Lady is upon you, you will receive your summons to Inner Temple. But I would not expect that to happen quickly. I would not expect that to happen at all. Those who *expect* to attain the Lady are the least likely to reach her."

Valentine's mood darkened at that, for not only did he expect to attain the Lady, it was absolutely vital that he do so; and yet he understood what Talinot Esulde was saying. In this holy place one made no demands on the fabric of existence. One surrendered; one gave up demands and needs and desires; one yielded, if one hoped to find peace. This was no place for a Coronal. The essence of a Coronal's being was the wielding of power, wisely if he were capable of wisdom, but in any event steadfastly; the essence of a pilgrim was surrender. In that contradiction he might easily be lost. Yet he had no choice but to go to the Lady.

He had, at least, reached the outer fringes of the Lady's domain. At the top of the cliff they had been greeted by unsurprised acolytes, plainly aware that out-of-season pilgrims were floating toward them. And now, looking pious and faintly absurd in the soft pale robes of pilgrims, they were gathered in a low long building of smooth pink stone near the crest of the cliff. Flags of the same pink stone formed a massive semicircular promenade that stretched for what appeared to be a great distance along the edge of the forest that topped the cliff: this was the Terrace of Assessment. Beyond it lay more forest; the other terraces were farther beyond; and deeper in, not visible from where they were now, rose the second chalk cliff atop the plateau that the outer one formed. A third cliff yet, Valentine knew, rose above the second somewhere hundreds of miles inland, and this was the holiest precinct, where Inner Temple was, where the Lady dwelled. For all that he had traveled so far, it seemed impossible that he would ever complete those last hundreds of miles.

Night was falling swiftly. He could look back through the circular window behind him and see the darkening sky and the broad dark bosom of the sea, lit only by the purpling light of the vanishing sun as it fled toward Piliplok. There was a speck out there, a scratch on the smooth surface of the water, that he thought and hoped was the trimaran *Rodamaunt Queen*, heading homeward; and out there too were the volevants dreaming their endless dream, and the sea-dragons making their way toward a greater sea; and beyond all that was Zimroel, its teeming cities, its forest preserves and parklands, its festivals, its billions of souls. There was much for him to look back on; but now he must look forward. He

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stared intently at Talinot Esulde, their first guide in this place, a tall slender person with milk-white skin and a shaven skull, who might be of either sex. Male was Valentine's guess — the height and something about the breadth of shoulders argued that, though not absolutely — but the delicacy of Talinot Esulde's facial bones, notably the fragile curve of the light ridges above the strange blue eyes, argued otherwise.

Talinot Esulde was explaining things: the daily routine of prayer and work and meditation, the system of dream-speaking, the arrangement of living quarters, the dietary restrictions, which excluded all wines and certain spices, and much else. Valentine tried to master it all, but there were so many regulations and requirements and obligations and customs that they tangled in his mind, and he ceased making the effort after a time, hoping that daily practice would instill the rules in him.

As darkness came, Talinot Esulde led them from the indoctrination hall, past the sparkling spring-fed rock pool where they had been bathed before being given their robes and where they would bathe twice each day until they left this terrace, and to the dining hall, a long low building farther from the cliff's rim. Here they were served a simple meal of soup and fish, flavorless and unappealing even though they were furiously hungry. Their servitors were novices like themselves, in robes of light green. The hall, a large one, was only partly full — the hour for dining was almost past, Talinot Esulde pointed out. Valentine looked at his fellow pilgrims. They were of all sorts, perhaps half of human stock, but also a great many Vroons and Ghayrogs, a sprinkling of Skandars, some Liimen, some Hjorts though not very many, and, far across the way, a little insular Su-Suheris group. The net of the Lady caught all the races of Majipoor, it would seem. All but one. "Do Metamorphs ever seek the Lady?" Valentine asked.

Talinot Esulde smiled seraphically. "If a Piurivar came to us, we would accept it. But they take no part in our rites. They live to themselves as though they were alone on Majipoor."

"Perhaps some have come here disguised in other forms," Sleet suggested.

"We would know that," said Talinot Esulde calmly.

After dinner they were taken to their rooms — individual chambers, hardly bigger than closets, in a hive-like lodge. A couch, a sink, a place for clothes, and nothing more. Lisamon glowered at hers. "No wine," she said, "and I give up my sword, and now I sleep in this box? I think I'm going to be a failure as a pilgrim, Valentine."

"Peace; and make the effort. We'll travel through the Isle as swiftly as we can."

He entered his room, which was between the warrior-woman's and Carabella's. Immediately the lightglobe dimmed, and when he settled in on his

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couch he found himself disappearing instantly into sleep, though the hour was still early. As consciousness left him, a new light glowed softly in his mind, and he beheld the Lady, the unmistakable, unquestionable Lady of the Isle.

Valentine had seen her in dreams many times before since Pidruid, the gentle eyes, the dark hair, the flower at her ear; the olive-hued skin, but now the image was sharper, the vision more detailed, and he noticed the small lines in the corners of her eyes and the tiny green jewels set in her earlobes and the thin silver band that encircled her brow. In his dream he held his hands out to her and said, "Mother, here I am. Call me to you, mother."

She smiled at him, but she made no answer.

They were in a garden, with alabandinas in bloom all about them. She nipped at the plants with a small golden implement, clipping away flowerbuds so the remaining ones would yield larger blossoms. He stood beside her, waiting for her to turn to him, but the work of nipping went on and on, and finally she said, still not looking his way, "One must give constant attention to one's task if it is to be done properly."

"Mother, I am Valentine your son!"

"See, each branch has five buds? Let them be and they all will open, but I take two away here, one here, one here, and the blooms are glorious." And as she spoke the buds unfurled, and the alabandinas filled the air with a fragrance so keen it stunned him, while the great yellow petals stretched forth like platters, revealing the black stamens and pistils within. She touched them lightly, sending a scattering of purple pollen into the air. And said, "You are who you are, and always will be." The dream changed, then, with nothing of the Lady remaining in it, but only a bower of thorny bushes waving rigid arms at him, and moleeka-birds of colossal size strutting about, and other images confused and ever-altering and telling him nothing that had coherent pattern.

When he woke he was expected to report at once to his dream-speaker, not Talinot Esulde but another acolyte of the guide level, this a person named Stauminaup, shaven also and also of ambiguous sex, but more likely than not a woman. These acolytes were of a medium level of initiation, Valentine had learned yesterday. They returned from Second Cliff to serve the needs of novices here.

Dream-speaking on the Isle was nothing like that which he had experienced in Falkynkip with Tisana. There were no drugs, there was no lying-together of bodies. He merely wanted to contrast Valentine's account of it with her own perceptions, to see what gulfs and contradictions might lie between. Therefore he presented the dream exactly as he recalled it, saying, as he had in sleep, "Mother, I am Valentine your son!" and studying

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Stauminaup for a reaction to that. But he might as well have been studying the chalk face of the cliff.

When he was done the speaker said, "And what color were the alabandina blooms ?"

"Why, yellow, with black centers!"

"A lovely flower. In Zimroel the alabandinas are scarlet, and yellow at the center. Do you like the colors of yours better?"

"I have no preference," said Valentine.

Stauminaup smiled. "The alabandinas of Alhanroel are yellow, with black centers. You may go now."

The speakings were much the same every day: a cryptic comment, or one that was perhaps not so cryptic, but lay open to varying interpretations, only no interpretations ever were offered. Stauminaup was like a repository for his dreams, absorbing them without providing counsel. Valentine became accustomed to that.

He became accustomed, too, to the daily routines of labor. He worked in the garden two hours each morning, doing minor trimming and weeding and much turning of soil, and in the afternoons he was a mason, taking instruction in the art of pointing the flagstones of the terrace. There were long sessions of meditation in which he was given no guidance whatever, only sent off to his room to stare at the walls. He saw hardly anything of his companions of the journey, except when they bathed together, at midmorning and again just before dinner, in the sparkling pool; and they had little to say. It was easy to get into the rhythm of this place and cast aside all urgencies. The tropic air, the perfume of millions of blossoms, the gentle tone of everything that went on here, lulled and soothed like a warm bath.

But Alhanroel lay thousands of miles to the east, and he was moving not an inch toward his goal so long as he remained at the Terrace of Assessment. Already a week had gone by. During his meditation sessions Valentine entertained wild fantasies of collecting his people and slipping away by night, passing illicitly through terrace after terrace, scaling Second Cliff and Third, presenting himself ultimately to the Lady at the threshold of her temple; but he suspected they would not get far, in a place where dreams were open books.

So he fretted. He knew that fretting would win him no advancement here, and he taught himself instead to relax, to give himself up utterly to his tasks, to clear his mind of all needs and compulsions and attachments, and thus to open the way toward the dream of summoning by which the Lady would beckon him inward. That had no effect either. He plucked weeds, he cultivated the warm rich soil, he carried buckets of mortar and grout to the farthest reaches of the terrace, he sat cross-legged in his meditation hours with his mind entirely empty, and night after night he went to bed

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praying that the Lady would appear and tell him, "It is time for you to come to me," but nothing happened.

"How long will this continue?" he asked Deliamber at the pool one day. "It's the fifth week! Or maybe the sixth — I'm losing count. Do I stay here a year? Two? Five?"

"Some of the pilgrims among us have done just that," said the Vroon. "I spoke with one, a Hjort who had served in patrols under Lord Voriax. She has spent four years here and seems quite resigned to staying at the outermost terrace forever."

"She has no need to go elsewhere. This is a pleasant enough inn, Deliamber. But I —"

"— have urgent appointments to the east," Deliambr said. "And therefore you are condemned to remain here. There's a paradox in your dilemma, Valentine. You strive to renounce purpose, but your renunciation itself has a purpose. Do you see? Your speaker surely does."

"Of course I see. But what do I do? How do I pretend not to care whether I stay here forever?"

"Pretense is impossible. The moment you genuinely don't care, you'll move onward. Not until then."

Valentine shook his head. "That's like telling me that my salvation depends on never thinking of gihornabirds. The harder I'd try not to think of them, the more flocks of gihornas would fly through my mind. What am I to do, Deliamber?"

But Deliamber had no other suggestions. The next day, Valentine learned that Shanamir and Vinorkis had received advancement to the Terrace of Inception.

Two more days passed before Valentine saw Deliamber again. The wizard remarked that Valentine did not look well, and Valentine replied, with an impatience he could not control, "How do you expect me to look? Do you know how many weeds I've pulled, how much masonry I've pointed, while in Alhanroel a Barjazid sits on Castle Mount and —"

"Peace," Deliamber said softly. "This is not like you."

"Peace? Peace? How long can I be peaceful?"

"Perhaps your patience is being tested. In which case, my lord, you are failing the test."

Valentine considered that. After a moment he said, "I admit your logic. But perhaps it's my ingenuity that's being tested. Deliamber, put a summoning dream into my head tonight."

"My sorceries, you know, seem of little value on this island."

"Do it. Try it. Concoct a message from the Lady and plant it in my mind, and then we'll see."

Deliamber, shrugging, put his tentacles to Valentine's hands for a moment of thought-transference. Valentine felt the faint distant tingle of contact.

"Your sorceries still work," he said.

And that night there came to him a

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dream in which he drifted like a volevant in the bathing pool, attached to the rocks by some membrane that had sprouted from his feet, and as he sought to free himself, the face of the Lady appeared, smiling, in the night sky, and whispered to him, "Come, Valentine, come to me, come," and the membrane dissolved, and he floated upward and soared on the breeze, borne by the wind toward Inner Temple.

Valentine relayed the dream to Stauminaup in his dream-speaking session, and she listened as though he were telling her of a dream of plucking weeds in the garden. The next night Valentine pretended he had had the same dream, and again she made no comment. He offered the dream on the next and asked for a speaking of it.

Stauminaup said, "The speaking of your dream is that no bird flies with another's wings."

His cheeks reddened. He went slinking away from her chamber.

Five days later, he was told by Talinot Esulde that he had been granted admission to the Terrace of Inception.

"But *why?*" he asked Deliamber.

The Vroon replied, "*Why?* is a useless question in matters of spiritual progress. Obviously something has altered in you."

"But I've had no legitimate summoning dream!"

"Perhaps you have," said the sorcerer.

One of the acolytes took him, by foot, through the forest paths to the next terrace. The road was a maze, zigzagging bewilderingly, and several times requiring them to turn in what seemed like precisely the wrong direction. Valentine was altogether lost by the time they emerged, some hours later, into a cleared area of immense size. Pyramids of dark-blue stone ten feet high rose there at regular intervals from the pink flagstone of the terrace.

Life was much the same here — menial tasks, meditation, daily dream-speaking, stark ascetic quarters, drab food. But there was also the beginning of holy instruction, an hour each afternoon in which the principles of the grace of the Lady were explained by means of elliptical parables and circuitous dialogues.

Valentine listened restlessly to all that at first. It seemed vague and abstract to him, and it was hard to concentrate on such cloudy matters when what possessed him was a direct political passion — to reach Castle Mount and settle the questioning of the governing of Majipoor. But by the third day it struck him that what the acolyte was saying about the role of the Lady was entirely political. She was a tempering force, Valentine realized, a mortar of love and faith binding together the centers of power on this world. However she worked her magic of dream-sending — and it was impossible to believe the popular myth, that she was in touch with the

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minds of millions of people every night — it was clear that her calm spirit soothed and eased the planet. The apparatus of the King of Dreams, Valentine knew, sent direct and specific dreams that lashed the guilty and admonished the uncertain, and the sendings of the King could be fierce. But as the warmth of the ocean moderates the climate of the land, so did the Lady make gentle the harsh forces of control on Majipoor, and the theology that had arisen around the person of the Lady as Divine Mother incarnate was, Valentine now understood, only a metaphor for the division of power that the early rulers of Majipoor had devised.

So he listened with keener interest. He put aside his eagerness to move to loftier terraces for a time, to learn more here.

Valentine was entirely alone at this terrace. That was now. Shanamir and Vinorkis were nowhere to be seen — had they been sent on already to the Terrace of Mirrors? — and the rest, so far as he knew, remained at the first terrace. Most of all he missed Carabella's sparkling energies and Deliamber's sardonic wisdom, but the others too had become part of his soul in the long, difficult journey across Zimroel, and not to have them about him here was discomforting. His days as a juggler seemed long gone and never to be recaptured. Occasionally now he would, in leisure moments, take fruits from the trees and toss them in the old familiar patterns, to the amusement of passing novices and acolytes. One in particular, a thick-shouldered black-bearded man named Farssal, made a point of watching in fascination whenever Valentine juggled.

"Where did you learn those arts?" Farssal asked.

"In Pidruid," Valentine said. "I was with a juggling troupe."

"It must have been a fine life."

"It was," said Valentine, remembering the excitement of standing before the dark-visaged Lord Valentine in the arena at Pidruid, and of stepping out onto the vast stage of Dulorn's Perpetual Circus, and all the rest, unforgettable scenes of his past.

Farssal said, "Can those skills be taught, or is it an inborn knack?"

"Anyone can learn, anyone with a quick eye and the willingness to concentrate. I learned myself in just a week or two, last year in Pidruid."

"No! Surely you've juggled all your life!"

"Not before last year."

"What led you to take it up, then?"

Valentine smiled. "I needed a livelihood, and there were traveling jugglers in Pidruid for the Coronal's festival, who had need of an extra pair of hands. They taught me quickly, as I could teach you."

"You could, do you think?"

"Here," Valentine said, and tossed the black-bearded man one of the fruits he was juggling, a firm green bishawar. "Throw that back and forth between

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your hands awhile, to loosen your fingers. You must master a few basic positions, and certain habits of perception, which will take practice, and then —"

"What did you do before you were a juggler?" asked Farssal as he tossed the fruit.

"I wandered about," said Valentine. "Here: hold your hands in this fashion —"

He drilled Farssal half an hour, trying to train him as Carabella and Sleet had done for him at the inn in Pidruid. It was a welcome diversion in this placid and monotonous life. Farssal had quick hands and good eyes and learned rapidly, though not nearly so rapidly as had Valentine himself. Within a few days he had developed most of the elementary skills and could juggle after a fashion, though not gracefully. He was an outgoing and talkative man, who kept up a steady flow of conversation as he flipped the bishawars from hand to hand. Born in Ni-moya, he said; for many years a merchant in Piliplok; recently overtaken by a spiritual crisis that had thrust him into confusion and then sent him on the Isle pilgrimage. He talked of his marriage, his unreliable sons, his winning and losing huge fortunes at the gaming tables; and he wanted to know all about Valentine as well, his family, his ambitions, the motives that had brought him to the Lady. Valentine dealt with these queries as plausibly as he could and turned aside the most awkward ones with quickly contrived dissertations on the art of juggling.

At the end of the second week — toil, study, meditation, periods of free time spent juggling with Farssal, a stable and static round — Valentine felt restlessness coming over him again.

He had no idea how many terraces there were — nine? ninety? — but if he spent this much time at each, he might be years in reaching the Lady. Some means of abbreviating the process of ascent was needed.

Counterfeit summoning dreams did not seem to work. He trotted forth his drifting-in-the-pool dream for Silimein, his dream-speaker here, but she was no more impressed by it than Stauminaup had been. He tried, during his meditation periods and when he was falling asleep at night, to reach forth to the mind of the Lady and implore her to summon him. This produced nothing useful either. He asked those who sat near him in the dining hall how long they had been at the Terrace of Inception. "Two years," said one. "Eight months," said another. They looked untroubled.

"And you?" he asked Farssal.

Farssal said he had arrived only a few days before Valentine. But he felt no impatience about moving on. "There's no hurry, is there? We serve the Lady wherever we may be, don't you think? So one terrace is as good as another."

Valentine nodded. He hardly dared disagree.

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Late in the third week he thought he caught sight of Vinorkis far across the field of stajja where he was working. But he was not sure — was that a flash of orange on that Hjort's whiskers? — and the distance was too great for shouting. The next day, though, as Valentine stood casually juggling with Farssal near the bathing pool, he saw Vinorkis, unquestionably Vinorkis, watching from the other side of the plaza. Valentine excused himself and jogged over. After so many weeks sundered from his old companions here, even the Hjort was a welcome sight.

"Then it *was* you in the stajja fields," Valentine said.

Vinorkis nodded. "These past few days I've had several glimpses of you, my lord. But the terrace is so huge — I've never been able to come close. When did you arrive?"

"About a week after you. Are there others of us here?"

"Not so far as I know," the Hjort replied. "Shanamir was, but he's moved on. I see you've lost none of your juggling skill, my lord. Who's your partner?"

"A man of Piliplok. Quick with his hands."

"And with his tongue as well?"

Valentine frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Have you said much to this man of your past, my lord, or of your future?"

"Of course not." Valentine stared. "No, Vinorkis! Surely no spies of the Coronal right here on the Lady's own Isle!"

"Why not? Is it so hard to infiltrate this place?"

"But why do you suspect —"

"Last night, after I glimpsed you in the fields, I came here to make inquiry about you. One of those I spoke to was your new friend, my lord. Asked him if he knew you and he started questioning *me*. Was I your friend, had I known you in Pidruid, why had we come to the Isle, and so on and so on. My lord, I am uneasy when strangers ask questions. Especially in this place, where one is taught to remain apart from others."

"You may be too suspicious, Vinorkis."

"Maybe so. But guard yourself anyway, my lord."

"That I will," said Valentine. "He'll learn nothing from me but what he's already had. Which is merely some juggling."

"He may already know too much about you," said the Hjort gloomily. "But let us watch him, even as he watches you."

The notion that he might be under surveillance even here — and Vinorkis might well be right about that, Valentine told himself, thinking back over Farssal's overtures of friendship — was a dismaying one. Was there no sanctuary? Valentine wished he had Sleet beside him, or Deliamber. A spy now might well become an assassin later, as

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Valentine drew closer to the Lady and became that much more of a peril to the usurper.

But Valentine seemed to be drawing no closer to the Lady. Another week went by in the same fashion as before. Then, just as he was coming to believe he would spend the rest of his days at the Terrace of Inception, and when he was reaching a point where it mattered little to him if he did, he was called from the fields and told to make ready to go on to the Terrace of Mirrors.

9.

This third terrace was a place of dazzling beauty, with a glitter that reminded Valentine of Dulorn. It nestled against the base of Second Cliff, a forbidding vertical wall of white chalk that seemed an absolute barrier to further inward progress; and when the sun was in the west, the face of the cliff was such a wonder of reflected brilliance that it stunned the eye and wrung gasps of awe from the soul.

Then, too, there were the mirrors — great rough-hewn slabs of polished black stone set edgewise in the ground everywhere about this terrace, so that wherever one looked one encountered one's own image, glowing against a shining inner light. Valentine at first studied himself critically, looking for the changes that his journey had brought upon him, some dimming of the warm radiance that had flowed from him since the Pidruid days, or perhaps some marks of weariness or stress. But he saw none of that, only the familiar golden-haired smiling man, and he waved to himself and winked amiably and saluted, and then, after a week or so, ceased to notice his reflection at all. If he had been ordered to ignore the mirrors, he would probably have lived in guilty tension, flicking his gaze involuntarily toward them and wrenching it away; but no one here told him what purpose the mirrors served or what attitude he should take toward them, and in time he simply forgot them. This, he realized much later, was the key to forward movement on the Isle: evolution of the spirit from within, a growing ability to discern and discard the irrelevant.

He was entirely alone here. No Shanamir, no Vinorkis, and no Farssal. Valentine kept close watch for the black-bearded man: if indeed he were some sort of spy, he would doubtless find a way to follow Valentine from terrace to terrace. But Farssal did not arrive, nor did anyone here pay undue attention to Valentine as Farssal had done in the earlier terrace.

He stayed at the Terrace of Mirrors eleven days and went onward, in the company of five other novices, via a floater-sled to the rim of Second Cliff and the Terrace of Consecration.

From here there was a magnificent view back over the first three terraces, far below, to the distant sea. Valentine

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could barely see the Terrace of Assessment — only a thin line of pink against the dark green of the forest — but the great Terrace of Inception spread out awesomely at the midpoint of the lower plateau, and the Terrace of Mirrors, just below, blazed like a million bright pyres in midday light.

Valentine had lost hope of meeting his comrades again until this journey across the Isle was done. The terraces were too large, the rate of progress through them too unpredictable; he had no idea whether the others were ahead of him or behind, or even here at the Terrace of Consecration.

It was becoming unimportant to him, now, how swift his pace might be. Time was losing its meaning. Probably winter had come, but in this balmy latitude winter meant only that certain plants that had been in flower in summer now bore ripening fruit, and those that had fruited in the summer now came into bloom again. There was no perceptible change in climate, and, so close to the Equator, the days and nights were always of the same length.

He had slipped entirely into the rhythm of the place. He worked in the fields; he attended lengthy sessions of spiritual instruction; he spent much of his time in the darkened stone-roofed building that was the shrine of the lady, asking, in a way that was not really asking at all, that illumination be granted him. Occasionally he remembered that he had intended to go quickly to the heart of the Isle and to the woman who dwelled there. But there seemed little urgency to any of that now. He had become a true pilgrim.

Beyond the Terrace of Consecration lay the Terrace of Flowers, and beyond that the Terrace of Devotion, and then the Terrace of Surrender. All these were of Second Cliff, as was the Terrace of Ascent, that was the final stage before one went up onto the plateau where the Lady lived. Each of the terraces, Valentine came to understand, completely encircled the island, so that there might be a million votaries in each at any time, or even more, and each pilgrim saw only a tiny segment of the whole as he pursued his course toward the center. How much effort had gone into constructing all this! How many lives had been given over entirely to the Lady's service! And each pilgrim moved within a sphere of silence: no friendships were begun here, no confidences were exchanged, no lovers embraced. Farssal had been a mysterious exception to that custom. It was as though this place existed outside of time and apart from the ordinary rituals of life.

In this middle zone of the Isle Valentine felt calm, quiet of soul, engrossed in his daily round. There was less emphasis on teaching here, more on toil. When he reached Third Cliff, he knew, he would join those who actually carried out the Lady's work in the world at large; for it was not the Lady herself, he now under-

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stood, who emanated most sendings to the world, but rather the millions of advanced acolytes of Third Cliff, whose minds and spirits became amplifiers for the Lady's benevolence. Not that everyone reached Third Cliff: many of the older acolytes, he gathered, had spent decades on Second Cliff, performing administrative tasks, with neither the hope nor the desire of moving toward the more taxing responsibilities of the inner zone.

In his third week at the Terrace of Devotion Valentine was granted what he knew to be an unmistakable summoning dream.

He saw himself crossing that parched purple plain that had darkened his sleep in Pidruid. The sun was low at the horizon, and the sky was harsh and bleak, and ahead of him lay two broad mountain ranges that rose like giant swollen fists. In the jagged boulder-strewn valley between them the last ruddy glimmer of sunlight was visible, a peculiar oily light, ominous, more of a stain than a radiance. A cool dry wind blew out of that strangely illuminated valley, and on it came sighing, singing sounds, soft melancholy melodies riding the breeze. Valentine walked for hours but made no progress: the mountains grew no nearer, the desert sands extended themselves infinitely as he trekked, that last shard of light did not depart. His strength was ebbing. Menacing mirages danced before him. He saw Simonan Barjazid, the King of Dreams, and his three sons. He saw the ghastly senile Pontifex roaring on his subterranean throne. He saw monstrous amorfibots crawling sluggishly in the dunes, and the snouts of massive dhumkars rising like augers out of the sands, probing the air for prey to feed the heavy-bodied creatures lurking far below. Things hissed and twanged and whispered; insects swarmed in nasty little clouds; a rain of dry sand began to fall, lightly, clogging his eyes and nostrils. He was weary and ready at any moment to yield and halt, to lie down in the sand and let the shifting dunes cover him, but one thing drew him on, for in the valley a glowing figure moved to and fro, a smiling woman, the Lady his mother, and so long as she could be seen there, he would not cease pressing forward. He felt the warmth of her presence, the pull of her love. "Come," she murmured. "Come to me, Valentine!" Her arms reached toward him across that terrible desert of monstrosities. His shoulders sagged. His knees weakened. He could not continue, though he knew he must. "Lady," he whispered, "I am at my end, I must rest; I must sleep!" At that the glow between the mountains grew warmer and brighter. "Valentine," she called. "Valentine, my son!" He could scarcely keep his eyes open. It was so tempting to lie down in the warm sand. "You are my son," came the voice of the Lady across that impossible distance, "and I have need of you," and as she said these words he found new strength and walked more

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rapidly and then began to run lightly over the hard, crusted desert floor, his heart lifting, his stride widening. Now the distances quickly dwindled, and Valentine could see her clearly, awaiting him on a terrace of violet-hued stone, smiling, reaching to him with outstretched arms, calling his name in a voice that rang like the bells of Nimoya.

He awoke with the sound of her voice still ringing in his mind.

It was dawn. Wondrous energy flooded his spirit. He rose and went down to the great amethystine basin that was the bathing pool here at the Terrace of Devotion, and plunged boldly into the chilly spring-water. Afterward he trotted to the chamber of Menesipta, his dream-speaker here, a compact, fine-honed person with flashing dark eyes and a taut, spare face, and poured forth the dream to her in one long rush of words.

Menesipta sat silently.

The coolness of her response dampened Valentine's exuberance. He remembered going to Stauminaup at the Terrace of Assessment with the fraudulent summoning-dream of the volevant and how swiftly Stauminaup had dismissed that dream. But this was no fraud. He had no Deliamber here to do witcheries on his mind.

Valentine said at length, "May I ask an evaluation?"

"The dream has familiar overtones," Menesipta replied calmly.

"Is that your whole speaking of it?"

She seemed amused. "What more would you have me say?"

Valentine clenched his fists in frustration. "If someone came to me for a speaking of such a dream, I would call it a dream of summoning."

"Very well."

"Do you agree? Would *you* call it a dream of summoning?"

"If it would please you."

"Pleasing me isn't the point," said Valentine, irritated. "Either the dream was a dream of summoning or it wasn't. What is your view of it?"

Smiling obliquely, the dream-speaker said, "I call your dream a dream of summoning."

"And now?"

"Now?" Now you have your morning duties to observe."

"A dream of summoning, as I understand it," said Valentine tightly, "is required in order to attain the presence of the Lady."

"Indeed."

"Should I not advance now to Inner Temple?"

Menesipta shook her head. "No one goes from Second Cliff to Inner Temple. Only when you reach the Terrace of Adoration does a summoning dream suffice of itself to call you inward. Your dream is interesting and important, but it changes nothing. Go to your duties, Valentine."

Anger throbbed in him as he left her chamber. He knew he was being foolish, that a mere dream could not be enough to sweep him past the remain-

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ing hurdles that separated him from the Lady, and yet he had expected so much from it — he had hoped Menesipta would clap her hands and cry out in joy and ship him at once to Inner Temple, and none of that had happened, and the letdown was painful and infuriating.

Worse was in store. As he came from the fields two hours later, an acolyte intercepted him and said bluntly, "You are ordered immediately to the harbor at Taleis, where new pilgrims await your guidance."

Valentine was stunned. The last thing he wanted now was to be sent back to the starting point.

But that was their plan for him. He was to set out at once, on foot and alone, making his way outward from terrace to terrace and getting himself to the Terrace of Assessment in the shortest possible time. They provided him at the terrace commissary with enough food to see him as far as the Terrace of Flowers. They gave him also a useful direction-finding device, an amulet to be fastened to his arm, that would scan for buried road-markers and emit a soft high pinging sound to tell him he was on the shortest road from one terrace to the next.

At midday he left the Terrace of Devotion. But the path he chose was the one inward toward the Terrace of Surrender, not the one that would take him back toward the coast.

The decision came suddenly and with unarguable force. He simply *could not* allow himself to be turned away from the Lady. It would add months or even years to his pilgrimage. Slipping off on an unauthorized trek, on this highly disciplined island, held serious risks, but he felt he had no choice. Briefly he wished he had Deliamber or Carabella here to consult, but they were far away. He was alone and would act alone, taking full responsibility for his actions, as befitted one who would be Coronal.

He circled past the rim of the terrace and found the grassy path that cut diagonally across the recreation field to the main road. There he was supposed to turn left toward the outer terraces. But — feeling extraordinarily conspicuous — he turned right instead and set out briskly toward the island's interior.

No alarms went off. No acolytes popped from the bushes to tell him he was heading the wrong way. Soon he was beyond the settled part of the terrace and the road had narrowed from wide paved highway to earthen track, with forest pressing close on all sides.

The question of his direction amulet's value going inland was quickly settled. Within half an hour he was at a fork in the road. When he started at random down the left-hand branch, the quiet pinging tone vanished, returning when he had made his way back to the other fork. A useful device, he thought.

He walked steadily until nightfall. Then he camped in a pleasant grove

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beside a gentle stream and allowed himself a sparing meal of cheese and sliced meat. He slept fitfully, stretching out on the cool moist ground between two slender trees.

The first pink glimmer of dawn woke him. He stirred, stretched, opened his eyes. A quick splash in the stream, yes, and then a bit of breakfast, and then —

Valentine heard sounds in the forest behind him — twigs snapping, something moving through the bushes. Quietly he slipped behind a thick-trunked tree by the edge of the stream and peered warily around it. And saw a powerfully built black-bearded man emerge from the underbrush, pause by Valentine's campsite, look cautiously about.

Farssal.

In a pilgrim's robe. But with a dagger strapped to his left forearm.

Some twenty-five feet separated the two men. Valentine frowned, considered his options, calculated tactics. Where had Farssal found a dagger on this peaceful island? Why was he tracking Valentine through the forest, if not to slay him? It was as he had feared: they would stop at nothing to keep him from the Lady.

Violence was alien to Valentine. But he saw no choice here. To take Farssal by surprise seemed the only course that made sense.

He rocked back and forth a moment on the balls of his feet, centered his mind as though he were about to juggle, and sprang from his hiding place.

Farssal whirled and managed to get the dagger from its scabbard just as Valentine crashed into him. With a sudden desperate hacking motion Valentine slammed the side of his hand into the underside of Farssal's arm, numbing it, and the dagger dropped to the ground; but an instant later Farssal's meaty arms wrapped Valentine in a crushing grip.

They stood locked, face to face. Farssal was a head shorter than Valentine, but deeper of chest, broader of shoulder, a bull-bodied man. He strained to throw Valentine to the ground; Valentine struggled to break free; neither was able to sway the other, though veins bulged on their foreheads and their faces went red and swollen with strain.

"This is madness," Valentine murmured. "Let go, back off. I mean you no harm."

Farssal only tightened his grip.

"Who sent you?" Valentine asked. "What do you want with me?"

Silence. The mighty arms, Skandar-strong, continued inexorably pressing inward. Valentine fought for breath. Pain dazed him. He tried to force his elbows outward and snap the hold. No. Farssal's face was ugly and distorted with effort, his eyes fierce, his lips tightly set. And slowly but measurably he was forcing Valentine to his knees.

Resisting that terrible grip was im-

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possible. Valentine abruptly ceased trying, and let himself go limp as a bundle of rags. Farssal, surprised, twisted him to one side; Valentine allowed his knees to buckle and offered no resistance as Farssal hurled him down. But he landed lightly, on his back with his legs coiled above him,, and as Farssal lunged furiously for him, Valentine brought his feet up with all his force into the other man's gut. Farssal gasped and grunted and staggered back, stunned. Valentine, springing to his feet, seized Farssal with arms made greatly muscular by a year of juggling, and pushed him down roughly to the ground, and held him pinned there, knees against Farssal's outspread arms, hands gripping his shoulders.

How strange this is, Valentine thought, to be fighting hand-to-hand with another being, as though we were unruly children! It had the quality of a dream.

Farssal glared at him in rage, slammed his feet angrily against the ground, tried in vain to push Valentine off.

"Talk to me now," Valentine said. "Tell me what this means. Did you come here to kill me?"

"I will say nothing."

"You who talked so much, when we were juggling?"

"That was before."

"What am I to do with you?" Valentine asked. "If I let you up, you'll be at me again. But if I hold you here, I hold myself as well!"

"You can't hold me long this way."

Once more Farssal heaved. His strength was enormous. But Valentine's grip on him was firm. Farssal's face was scarlet; thick cords stood out on his throat; his eyes blazed with fury and frustration. For a long moment he lay still. Then he appeared to gather all his strength, going tense and thrusting upward. Valentine could not withstand that awesome push. There was a wild moment when neither man was in control of the situation, Valentine half flung aside, Farssal writhing and flexing as he tried to roll over. Valentine grabbed Farssal's thick shoulders and attempted to force him back to the ground. Farssal shook him away and his fingers clawed for Valentine's eyes. Valentine ducked below the clutching fingers. Then, without pausing to think about it, he seized Farssal by his coarse black beard and pulled him to one side, slamming his head into a rock that jutted from the soil close by.

Farssal made a heavy grunting sound and lay still.

Springing to his feet, Valentine seized the fallen dagger and stood above the other. He was trembling, not out of fear but from the release of tension, like a bowstring after the arrow has been let go. His ribs ached from that awful hug, and the muscles of his arms and shoulders were twitching and throbbing in fifty different rhythms.

"Farssal?" he said, nudging him with one foot.

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No response. Dead? No. The great barrel of a chest was slowly rising and falling, and Valentine heard the sound of hoarse, ragged breathing.

Valentine hefted the knife. What now? Sleet might say, finish the fallen man off before he came to. Impossible. One did not kill, except in self-defense. one certainly did not kill an unconscious man, would-be assassin though he might be. To kill another intelligent being meant a lifetime of punishing dreams, the vengeance of the murdered. But he could scarcely just walk away, leaving Farssal to recover and come after him. Some birdnet-vine would be a useful thing to have just now. Valentine did see some other sort of vine, a sturdy-looking liana with green-and-yellow stems as thick as his fingers, scrambling far up the side of a tree; and with some fierce tugging he pulled down five huge strands of it. These he wound tightly around Farssal, who stirred and moaned but did not regain consciousness. In ten minutes Valentine had him securely trussed, bound like a mummy from chest to ankles. He tested the vines and they held tight at his pull. Most likely Farssal, once he woke, would be able to get free of them in a few hours of heavy toil, but by then Valentine would be far from here.

He gathered his few possessions and hurried away. Breakfast could wait until later.

The savage encounter in the forest had shaken him badly. Not only the fighting, though that was barbaric enough, and would disturb him a long while; but also the idea that his enemy no longer was content merely to spy on him, but was sending murderers to him. And if that is so, he thought, can I doubt any longer the truth of the visions that tell me I am Lord Valentine?

Valentine barely comprehended the concept of deliberate murder. One absolutely did not take the lives of others. In the world he knew, that was basic. Not even the usurper, overthrowing him, had dared to kill him, for fear of the dark dreams that would come; but evidently now he was willing to accept that dread risk. Unless, Valentine thought, Farssal had resolved on the assassination attempt by himself, as a ghastly way of winning the favor of his employers, when he discovered Valentine slipping away toward the inner zone of the Isle.

A somber business. Valentine shuddered. More than once, as he strode along the forest trail, he looked tensely behind him, half expecting to see the black-bearded man pursuing him again.

But no pursuers came. By midafternoon Valentine saw the Terrace of Surrender in the distance, and the flat white face of Third Cliff far beyond it.

No one was likely to notice an unauthorized pilgrim quietly moving about among all these millions. He entered the Terrace of Surrender with what he hoped was an innocent expression, as if he had every right to be

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there. It was an opulent, spacious place, with a row of lofty buildings of dark-blue stone at its eastern end and a grove of bassa-trees in fruit closer at hand. Valentine added half a dozen of the tender, succulent bassa-fruits to his pack and continued to the terrace baths, where he rid himself of the grime of his first day's trek. Growing even bolder, he found the dining hall and helped himself to soup and stewed meat. And as casually as he had come, he slipped out the far end of the terrace just as night was descending.

Again he slept in an improvised forest bed, dozing fitfully and waking often to thoughts of Farssal, and when there was light enough he rose and went onward. The amulet was valuable in guiding him along the forest paths. Simply heading toward Third Cliff was no great challenge, for that stupefying white wall loomed high above the forest even where the trees were thickest. But Valentine needed to find the place where the floater-sleds ascended to the summit, and for that only the amulet could help him.

All day he walked, and all the next, and still he seemed no closer to the cliff. It seemed near, but evidently that was merely a trick of its size. Traveling on foot through these woods, he was covering, he guessed, no more than fifteen or eighteen miles a day; might it be fifty or eighty to Third Cliff? And then, how far from there to Inner Temple? This journey might take weeks. No matter: it had to be undertaken. He walked on. His stride grew ever more springy; this forest life was agreeing with him.

On the fourth day Valentine reached the Terrace of Ascent. He paused briefly to refresh himself, and in the morning went onward until he arrived at the base of Third Cliff.

And now? He knew nothing of the mechanism that transported the floater-sleds up the cliff walls. From here he could see the small settlement at the floater station, a few cottages, some acolytes working in a field, sleds stacked by the foot of the cliff. He considered waiting until darkness and then trying to run the sleds, but decided against it: climbing that giddy height unaided, using equipment he did not understand, seemed too risky. Forcing the acolytes to aid him was even less to his liking.

One option remained. He tidied his travel-stained robes, donned an air of supreme authority, and advanced at a dignified pace toward the floater station.

The acolytes — there were three of them — regarded him coolly.

He said, "Are the floaters ready for opeation?"

"Have you business on Third Cliff?"

"I do." Valentine turned on them his most dazzling smile, letting them see, also, an underlying aspect of confidence, strength, total self-assurance. He said crisply, "I am Valentine of Alhanroel, under special summons to the

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Lady. They wait for me above to escort me to Inner Temple."

"Why were we not told of this?"

Valentine shrugged. "How would I know? Someone's error, obviously. Shall I wait here until the papers arrive for you? Shall the Lady wait for me? Come, get your floaters floating!"

"Valentine of Alhanroel — special summons to the Lady —" The acolytes frowned, shook their heads, peered uncomfortably at one another. "This is all very irregular. Who did you say is to be your escort up there?"

Valentine took a deep breath. "The High Speaker Tisana of Falkynkip herself has been sent to fetch me!" he announced resonantly. "She, too, will be kept waiting while you fidget and fumble! Will you answer to her for this delay? You know what sort of temper the High Speaker has!"

"True, true," the acolytes agreed nervously, nodding to one another as though such a person actually existed and her wrath were something greatly to be dreaded.

Valentine saw that he had won. With brisk impatient gestures he mobilized them to their tasks, and in a moment he was aboard a sled and floating serenely toward the highest and most sacred of the three cliffs of the Isle of Sleep.

10.

The air atop Third Cliff was clear and pure and cool, for this level of the Isle lay thousands of feet above sea level, and up here in the eyrie of the Lady the environment was quite different from that of the two lower steps. The trees were tall and slim, with needle-like leaves and open, symmetrical boughs, and the shrubs and plants about them had a subtropical hardiness to them, thick glossy leaves and sturdy rubbery stems. Looking back, Valentine could not see the ocean from here, only the forested sprawl of Second Cliff and a hint of First Cliff far beyond.

A pathway of elegantly joined stone blocks led from the rim of Third Cliff toward the forest. Unhesitantingly Valentine set out upon it. He had no idea of the topography of this level, only that there were many terraces, and the last of them was the Terrace of Adoration, where one awaited the call to the Lady. He did not expect to get all the way to the threshold of Inner Temple unintercepted, but he would go as far as he could, and when they seized him as a trespasser he would give them his name and ask that it be conveyed to the Lady, and the rest would be subject to her mercy, her grace.

He was halted before he reached the outermost of Third Cliff's terraces.

Five acolytes in the robes of the inner hierarchy, gold with red trim, emerged from the forest and arrayed themselves coolly across his path. There were three men, two women, all of considerable age, and they showed

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no fear of him at all.

One of the women, white-haired with thin lips and dark, intense eyes, said, "I am Lorivade of the Terrace of Shadows and I ask you in the Lady's name how you come to be here."

"I am Valentine of Alhanroel," he replied evenly, "and I am of the Lady's own flesh and would have you take me to her."

The brazen statement produced no smiles among the hierarchs.

Lorivade said, "You claim kinship with the Lady?"

"I am her son."

"Her son's name is Valentine, and he is Coronal on Castle Mount. What madness is this?"

"Bring to the Lady the news that her son Valentine has come to her across the Inner Sea and all of Zimroel, and that he is a fair-haired man, and I ask no more than that."

One of the men at Lorivade's side said, "You wear the robes of Second Cliff. It is forbidden for you to have made this ascent."

With a sigh Valentine said, "I understand that. My ascent was unauthorized, illegal, and presumptuous. But I claim the highest reasons of state. If my message is delayed in reaching the Lady, you will answer for it."

"We are not accustomed to threats here," Lorivade declared.

"I make no threat. I speak only of inevitable consequences."

A woman to the right of Lorivade said, "He's a lunatic. We'll have to confine him and treat him."

"And censure the crew below," said another man.

"And discover which terrace he's from and how he was allowed to wander away from it," said a third.

"I ask only that you send my message to the Lady," Valentine said quietly.

They surrounded him and, moving in formation, walked him briskly along the forest path to a place where three floaters were parked and a number of younger acolytes waited. Evidently they had been prepared for serious trouble. Lorivade gestured to one of the acolytes and issued brief orders; then the five hierarchs boarded one of the floaters and were borne away.

Acolytes moved toward Valentine. None too gently they caught him and propelled him toward one of the floaters. He smiled and indicated he would make no resistance, but they held him firmly and pushed him roughly into a seat. The floater rose to full hover and, at a signal, the mounts tethered to it began to trot toward the nearby terrace.

It was a place of wide, low buildings and great stone plazas, this Terrace of Shadows, and the shadows that gave it its name were black as the darkest ink, mysterious all-engulfing pools of night that stretched in strangely significant patterns over the abstract stone statuary. But Valentine's tour of the terrace was brief. His captors halt-

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ed outside a squat stark building without windows; a cunningly fashioned door slid open on silent hinges at the lightest of touches; he was ushered inside.

The door closed and left no trace in the wall.

He was a prisoner.

The room was square, low-ceilinged, and bleak. A single dim glowfloat cast a mellow greenish light. There was a cleanser, a sink, a commode, a mattress. Beyond that, nothing.

Would they send his message to the Lady?

Or would they leave him here to grow dusty, while they investigated the irregularities of his advent on Third Cliff, rummaging for weeks in the island bureaucracy?

An hour passed, two, three. Let them send an interrogator, he prayed, an inquisitor, anyone, only not this silence, this boredom, this solitude. He counted paces. The room was not precisely square: one pair of walls was a pace and a half longer than the other. He searched for the outlines of the doorway and could not find them. The fit was seamless, a marvel of design that gave him little cheer. He invented dialogues and silently embellished them, Valentine and Lord Valentine. But it was an amusement that soon palled.

He heard a faint whining sound and whirled to see a slot open in the wall and a tray come sliding into his cell. They had given him baked fish, a cluster of ivory-colored grapes, a beaker of cool red juice. "For this repast I thank you kindly," he said out loud. His fingers probed the wall, seeking the place where the tray had entered: no trace.

He ate. He invented more dialogues, conversing in his mind with Sleet, with the old dream-speaker Tisana, with Zalzan Gibor, with Captain Gorzval. He asked them about their childhoods, their hopes and dreams, their political opinions, their tastes in food and drink and clothing. Again the game wore thin after a while, and he stretched out to sleep.

Sleep was thin too, a shallow doze, broken half a dozen times by white dreary spells of wakefulness. His dreams were patchy ones; through them drifted the Lady, Farssal, the King of Dreams, the Metamorph chieftain, and the hierarch Lorivade, but they offered only muddled and murky words. When he woke, finally, a tray of breakfast had appeared in the room.

A long day passed.

He had never known a day so interminable. There was nothing at all to do, nothing, nothing whatever, an endless stretch of gray nothingness. He would have juggled his dishes, but they were light and flimsy things, and it would have been like juggling feathers. He tried to juggle his boots, but he had only two of those, and juggling things in twos was a fool's sport. He juggled memories instead, reliving all that had

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befallen him since Pidruid, but the prospect of an infinity of hours doing that dismayed him. He meditated until there was a dull buzz of fatigue between his ears. He crouched in the center of the room, trying to anticipate the moment when the next meal would arrive, but the tension he generated out of that yielded only feeble entertainment.

On the second night he made an attempt to communicate with the Lady. He prepared himself for sleep, but as his mind began to release itself from consciousness, he endeavored to slip into an intermediate place between waking and sleeping, a trance state of sorts. It was a ticklish business; for if he concentrated too intently, he would tip himself back into full wakefulness; and if he relaxed too thoroughly, he would fall asleep; he balanced there a long time, at the floating-point, wishing he had taken the opportunity in some quiet part of his Zimroel journey to have Deliamber train him in these matters.

At last he sent forth his spirit.

— *Mother?*

He imagined his soul coursing high over the Terrace of Shadows and drifting inward, inward, past terrace after terrace, to the core of Third Cliff, to Inner Temple, to the chamber where the Lady of the Isle rested.

— *Mother, it's Valentine. It's your son Valentine. I have so much to tell you, mother, and so much to ask! But you have to help me reach you.*

Valentine lay still. He was wholly calm. A pure white radiance seemed to glow in his mind.

— *Mother, I'm on Third Cliff, in a prison cell in the Terrace of Shadows. I've come so far, mother. But now I'm stopped. Send for me, mother!*

— *Mother* —

— *Lady* —

— *Mother* —

He slept.

The radiance still glowed. He perceived the first tingling music of the dream-state, the overture, the initial sensations of contact. Visions came. No longer was he imprisoned, but he lay beneath the cool white stars on a great circular platform of finely polished stone, as though an altar, and to him came a white-robed woman with lustrous dark hair, who knelt beside him and touched him lightly, saying in a tender voice, "You are my son Valentine, and I do acknowledge you before all Majipoor to be my son, and I summon you now to my side."

That was all. When he woke he could recall nothing else of the dream but that.

There was no breakfast tray for him that morning. Was it truly morning, then, or had he awakened in the middle of the night? Hours passed. No tray. Had they forgotten him? Did they plan to starve him to death? He felt a twinge of terror: was that an improvement over boredom? He thought he preferred boredom to terror, but not by much. He called out, but he

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knew it was useless. This place was sealed like a tomb. Like a tomb. Glumly Valentine looked at the accumulation of old trays, stacked against the far wall. He remembered the wonders and joys of food, the sausages of the Liimen, the fish that Khun and Sleet had grilled on the banks of the Steiche, the flavor of dwikka-fruit, the potent tang of fireshower wine in Pidruid. His hunger was growing intense, now. And he was frightened. Not bored at all now, but frightened. They had held a meeting, perhaps, and condemned him to death for overwhelming folly.

Minutes. Hours. Half a day gone now.

Folly to think he could touch the Lady's mind in sleep. Folly to think he could float effortlessly into Inner Temple and win her aid. Folly to think he could regain Castle Mount, or that he had ever had it at all. He had propelled himself halfway around the world on no force other than folly, and now, he thought bitterly, he would have the reward of his presumption and his foolishness.

Then at last he heard the familiar faint whine. But it was not the food-slot opening: it was the door.

Two white-haired hierarchs entered the cell. They favored him with a look of bleak and sour bafflement.

"Have you come to deliver my breakfast?" Valentine asked.

"We have come," said the taller one, "to conduct you to Inner Temple."

11.

He insisted that they feed him first — a wise move, for the trip proved to be a lengthy one, all the rest of the day by swift mount-drawn floater-wagon. The hierarchs sat flanking him in chilly silence throughout. When he asked a question — the name of some terrace through which they were passing, for example — they would reply in the fewest possible words; otherwise they offered no chatter, and Valentine thought it useless to engage them in any.

Third Cliff had many terraces — Valentine lost count after about seven — and they were much closer together than those of the outer cliffs, with only token strips of forest separating them. The glimpses Valentine had showed that this central zone of the Isle was a busy and populous place.

At twilight they came to the Terrace of Adoration, a place of serene gardens and rambling low buildings of whitewashed stone. Like all the other terraces it was circular in outline, but it was much smaller than the others, here at the innermost part of the island, a mere ringlet that probably could be walked in all its circumference in an hour or two, whereas it might take months to complete the circuit of a First Cliff terrace. Ancient gnarled trees with close-set oval leaves rose at regular intervals along its rampart. Bowers of richly blossoming vines coil-

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ed between the buildings; small courtyards were everywhere, decorated with slender pillars of polished black stone and bedecked with flowering shrubs of a kind Valentine did not recognize. In twos and threes the servants of the lady moved quietly through these peaceful precincts, saying little. Valentine was conducted to a chamber far more gracious than his last, with a broad sunken bath, an inviting bed, windows facing into a garden, baskets of fruit on the table. The hierarchs left him here. He bathed, nibbled fruit, waited for the next event. That was some time in arriving, an hour or more: a knock on the door, a soft voice asking if he wished dinner, a cart rolled into the room bearing more substantial fare than he had had since coming to the Isle — grilled meats, blue gourds artfully stuffed with minced fish, a beaker of something cold that might almost have been wine. Valentine ate eagerly. Afterward he stood by his windows a long time, studying the darkness. He saw nothing; he heard no one. He tested his door: locked. So he was still a prisoner, although in far more pleasing surroundings than before. Eventually he went to bed.

He slept a sleep of total dreamlessness and was awakened by a flood of golden sunlight cascading into his room. He bathed; the same discreet servitor appeared outside, with a breakfast of sausages and stewed pink fruit; and a short while after he was done the two somber hierarchs came to him, saying, "The lady has summoned you this morning."

They led him from the room, through a garden of marvelous beauty, and across a slender bridge of pure white stone that rose in a gentle arch above a dark pond in which golden fish swam in sparkling patterns. Ahead lay a wondrously manicured greensward. At the center of it was a one-story building of great size, extraordinarily delicate in form, with long narrow wings radiating in the form of starbeams from the circular center.

This could only be Inner Temple, Valentine thought.

Now he trembled. He had journeyed, for more months than he could remember, toward this very spot, toward the threshold of the mysterious woman whose realm this was, whom he fancied to be his mother. At last he was here; and what if it proved all to be foolishness, or fantasy, or terrible error; what if he were no one in particular, a yellow-haired idler from Zimroel, bereft of his memory through some stupidity and filled by trifling companions with nonsensical ambitions? The thought was unbearable. If the Lady repudiated him now, if she denied him —

He entered the temple.

The hierarchs still close at his sides, Valentine marched endlessly down an impossibly elongated entrance hall that was guarded every twenty feet by a grim-faced rigid warrior, and into an

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interior room, octagonal in shape, with walls of the finest white stone and a pool, octagonal also, at its center. Morning light entered through an open eight-sided skylight. At each corner of the room stood a stern figure in hierarchial robes. Valentine, a little dazed, looked from one to the next and saw no welcome on their faces, only a sort of pursed-lip disapproval.

There was a single note of music, softly swelling, then dying away, and when it was gone the Lady of the Isle was in the room.

She seemed much like the figure Valentine has seen so often in dreams: a woman of middle years and ordinary height, dusky of skin, with glossy black hair, warm soft eyes, a full mouth that hovered always at the edge of a smile, a silver band at her brow, and, yes, a flower behind one ear, with many thick green petals. It seemed, though, that there was an aura about her, a nimbus, a radiance of force and authority and majesty, such as befitted the Power of Majipoor that she was; and he had not been prepared for that, expecting as he had been only the warm motherly woman and forgetting that she was a queen, a priestess, almost a goddess, as well. He stood speechless before her, and for a long moment she studied him from the far side of the pool, her gaze resting lightly but penetratingly on his face. Then she waved one hand sharply in an unmistakable gesture of dismissal. Not of him: of the hierarchs. Their glacial calm was broken by that. They looked to one another, obviously confused. The Lady repeated the gesture, a mere quick shallow snap of the wrist, and something imperious flashed in her eyes, a look of almost terrifying strength. She was unaccustomed to being disobeyed. Three or four of the hierarchs left the room; the others dawdled, as if not believing that the Lady proposed to be left alone with the prisoner; and for an instant it seemed the a third wave of her hand might be necessary, as one of the oldest and most imposing of the hierarchs extended a quivering arm toward her in a motion of obvious protest. But at a glance from the Lady the hierarch's arm dropped back to his side. Slowly the last of them went out of the room.

Valentine fought the impulse to fall to his knees.

He said in a barely audible voice, "I have no idea of the proper obeisance to make. Nor do I know, Lady, how I should address you, without giving offense."

In a calm, measured voice she replied, "It will be enough, Valentine, if you call me mother."

The quiet words stunned him. He took a faltering few steps toward her, halted, stared.

"Is it so?" he asked in a whisper.

"There can be no doubt of it."

He felt his cheeks ablaze. He stood helpless, numbed by her grace. She beckoned to him, the tiniest movement of her fingertips, and he shook as

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though he were caught in an ocean gale. She beckoned again.

"Come close," she said. "Are you afraid? Come to me, Valentine!"

He crossed the room, went round the pool, drew near her. She put her hands into his. Instantly he felt a jolt of energy, a tangible, palpable throbbing, somewhat akin to what he had felt when Deliamber touched him to do wizardry-work, but enormously more powerful, enormously more awesome. He would have withdrawn his hands at that first throb of force, but she held him, and he could not, and her eyes close by his seemed to be seeing through him, entering all his mysteries.

"Yes," she said finally. "By the Divine, yes, Valentine, your body is strange but your soul is of my own making! Oh, Valentine, Valentine, what have they done to you? What have they done to Majipoor?" She tugged at his hands and pulled him close to her, and then he was in her arms, the Lady straining upward to embrace him, and he felt her trembling, now, no goddess but only a woman, a mother holding her troubled son. In her grasp he felt such peace as he had not known since his awakening in Pidruid, and he clung to her, praying she would never release him.

Then she stood back and surveyed him, smiling. "You were given a handsome body, at least. Nothing like what you once were, but pleasing to the eye, and strong as well, and healthy. They could have done much worse. They could have made you something weak and sickly and deformed, but I suppose they lacked the courage, knowing that eventually they would be repaid tenfold for all their crimes."

"Who, mother?"

"Why, Barjazid and his brood!"

She seemed surprised at his question. Valentine said, "I know nothing, mother, except what has come to me in dreams, and even that has been befogged and muddled."

"And what is it that you know?"

"That my body has been taken from me, that in some witchery of the King of Dreams I was left outside Pidruid as you see me, that someone else, I think it may be Dominin Barjazid, rules now from Castle Mount. But I know all this only in the most untrustworthy of ways."

"It is all true," the Lady replied.

"When was it that this happened?"

"In early summer," she said. "When you made the grand processional in Zimroel. I have no knowledge of how it was done; but one night as I lay sleeping I felt a wrenching, a tearing, as of the heart of the planet being ripped loose, and I awakened knowing that something evil and monstrous had occurred, and I sent out my soul toward you and was unable to reach you. There was only a silence where you had been, a void. Yet it was different from the silence that struck me when Voriax was slain, for I still felt your presence, but beyond my reach, as if behind a thick sheet of glass. I asked at

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once for news of the Coronal. He is in Til-omon, my people told me. And is he well, I asked? Yes, they said, he is well, he sails today toward Pidruid. But I could make no contact, Valentine. I sent forth my soul as I had not done in years, to every part of the world, and you were nowhere and somewhere, both at once. I was frightened and confused, Valentine, but I could do nothing but seek and wait, and news came to me that Lord Valentine had reached Pidruid, that he was guest in the mayor's grand house, and I had a vision of him across all this distance and his face was the face of my son. But his mind was other, and it was closed to me. I attempted a sending, and I could not send to him. And at last I began to understand."

"Did you know where I was?"

"Not at first. They had witched your mind so well it was altogether changed. Night after night I cast my soul forth into Zimroel in search of you — neglecting everything else here, but this was no trifling matter, this substitution of Coronals — and I thought I felt glimmers, a shard of your true self, a fragment — and after a time I was able to determine that you were alive, that you were in northwestern Zimroel, but there was still no reaching you. I had to wait until you had awakened more to yourself, until their witcheries had faded a bit and your true mind was restored at least in part."

"It is still far from whole, mother."

"I know that. But that can be remedied, I believe."

"When did you finally reach me?"

She paused a moment in thought. "It was near the Ghayrog city, I think, Dulorn, and I saw you first through the minds of others who were dreaming the truth about you. And I touched their minds, I refined and clarified what was in them, and I saw that your soul had imprinted its stamp on them and that they knew better than you did yourself what had befallen you. I circled about you in this way, and then I was able to enter you. And from that moment on you have gained in knowledge of your former self, as I have labored across so many thousands of miles to heal you and to draw you to me. But none of it was easy. The world of dreams, Valentine, is a difficult and shifting place, even for me, and to attempt to control it is like writing a book in the sand beside an ocean: the tide returns and obliterates nearly everything, and you must write it again, and again and again. But at last you are here."

"Did you know it when I reached the Isle?"

"I knew it, yes. I could feel your closeness."

"And yet you let me drift for months from terrace to terrace!"

She laughed. "There are millions of pilgrims in the outer terraces, Valentine. Sensing you was one thing, actually locating you another, far more difficult. Besides, you were not ready

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to come to me, nor I to receive you. I was testing you, Valentine. Watching you from afar, studying to see how much of your soul had survived, whether there still was any of the Coronal remaining in you. Before I acknowledged you I had to know these things."

"And does much of Lord Valentine remain in me, then?"

"A great deal. Far more than your enemies could ever suspect. Their scheme was faulty: they thought they had expunged you, when they only fuddled and disordered you."

"Would it not have been wiser for them to have killed me outright, than to have put my soul in some other body?"

"Wiser, yes," the Lady replied. "But they did not dare. Yours is an anointed spirit, Valentine. These Barjazids are superstitious beasts; they will risk overthrowing a Coronal, it seems, but not destroying him altogether, for fear of your spirit's vengeance. And their cowardly hesitation now will bring about the ruin of their scheme."

Valentine said softly, "Do you think I can ever regain my place?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"Barjazid wears the face of Lord Valentine. The people accept him as Coronal. He controls the power of Castle Mount. I have perhaps a dozen followers and am unknown. If I proclaim myself rightful Coronal, who will believe me? And how long then before Dominin Barjazid deals with me the way he should have dealt with me in Til-omon?"

"You have the support of the Lady your mother."

"And have you an army, mother?"

The Lady smiled gently. "I have no army, no. But I am a Power of Majipoor, which is not a small thing. I have the strength of righteousness and love, Valentine. I also have this."

She touched the silver circlet at her brow.

"Through which you make your sendings?" Valentine asked.

"Yes. Through which I can reach the minds of all Majipoor. I lack the ability of the Barjazids to control and direct, which their devices are capable of doing. But I can communicate, I can guide, I can influence. You will have one of these circlets before you leave the Isle."

"And I'll go quietly through Alhanroel, beaming messages of love to the citizens, until Dominin Barjazid descends from the Mount and gives me back the throne?"

The Lady's eyes flashed with the kind of anger Valentine had seen in them when she was sending the hierarchs from the room. "What sort of talk is that?" she snapped.

"Mother —"

"Oh, they *have* changed you? The Valentine I bore and reared accepted no thought of defeat."

"Nor do I, mother. But it all seems so immense, and I'm so weary. And to make war against fellow citizens of

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Majipoor — even against a usurper — mother, there's been no war on Majipoor since earliest times. Am I the one to break the peace?"

Her eyes were merciless. "The peace is already broken, Valentine. It falls to you to restore the order of the realm. A false Coronal has reigned nearly a year now. Cruel and foolish laws are proclaimed daily. The innocent are punished, the guilty flourish. Balances constructed thousand of years ago are being destroyed. When our people came here from Old Earth, fourteen thousand years past, many mistakes were made, much suffering was endured, before we found our way of government, but since the time of the first Pontifex we have lived without major upheaval, and since the time of Lord Stiamot there has been peace on this world. Now there has been a rupture of that peace, and it falls to you to put things to rights."

"And if I accept what Dominin Barjazid has done? If I decline to embroil Majipoor in civil war? Would the consequences be so evil?"

"You know the answers to those questions already."

"I would hear them from you, because my resolve wavers."

"It shames me to hear you speak those words."

"Mother, I have undergone strange things on this journey and they have taken much of my strength. Am I not allowed a moment of fatigue?"

"You are a king, Valentine."

"I was, perhaps, and perhaps will be again. But much of my kingliness was stolen from me in Til-omon. I am an ordinary man now. And not even kings are immune to weariness and discouragement, mother."

In a tone more gentle than the one she had been using, the Lady said, "The Barjazid does not yet rule as an absolute tyrant, for that might turn the people against him, and he is still insecure in his power — while you live. But he rules for himself and for his family, not for Majipoor. He lacks a sense of right, and does only what seems useful and expedient. As his confidence grows, so too will his crimes, until Majipoor groans under the whip of a monster."

Valentine nodded. "When I am not so weary, I see that, yes."

"Think, too, of what will happen when the Pontifex Tyeveras dies, which must sooner or later happen, and more probably sooner than later."

"Barjazid goes to the Labyrinth then, and becomes a powerless recluse. Is that what you mean?"

"The Pontifex is not powerless, and he does not need to be a recluse. In your lifetime there has been only Tyeveras, growing older and older and steadily more strange. But a Pontifex in full vigor is a very different entity. What if Barjazid is Pontifex five years from now? Do you think he'll be content to sit in that underground hole the way Tyeveras now does? He'll rule with force, Valentine." She looked at

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him intently. "And who do you think will become Coronal?"

Valentine shook his head.

She said, "The King of Dreams has three sons. Minax is the oldest, who will have the throne in Suvreal one of these days. Dominin is now Coronal and will be Pontifex, if you choose to let him. Whom will he select as new Coronal but his younger brother Cristoph?"

"But it goes against all nature for a Pontifex to give Castle Mount to his own brother!" Valentine protested.

"It goes against all nature for a son of the King of Dreams to overthrow a rightful Coronal, too," said the Lady. Once more her eyes flashed. "Consider this, also: when there is a change in Coronals, there is a change in the Lady of the Isle! I go to live out my days in the palace for retired Ladies in the Terrace of Shadows, and who comes to Inner Temple? The mother of the Barjazids! Do you see, Valentine, they will have everything, they will control all of Majipoor!"

"This must not be," Valentine said.

"This will not be."

"What shall I do?"

"You will take ship from my port of Numinor to Alhanroel, with all your people and others I will provide for you. You will land in Stoienzar, and journey to the Labyrinth for the blessing of Tyeveras."

"But if Tyeveras is a madman —"

"Not entirely mad. He lives in a perpetual dream, and a strange one, but I have touched his spirit lately, and the old Tyeveras still exists somewhere within. He has been Pontifex forty years, Valentine, and was Coronal a long while before that, and he knows the way our realm was meant to be governed. If you can reach him, if you can demonstrate to him that you are the true Lord Valentine, he will give you aid. Then you must march on Castle Mount. Do you shrink from that task?"

"I shrink only from bringing chaos upon Majipoor."

"The chaos is already at hand, Valentine. What you bring is order and justice." She moved close to him, so that all the frightening power of her personality was exposed to him, and touched his hand, and said in a low, vehement tone, "I bore two sons, and from the moment one looked at them in their cradles, one knew they were meant to be kings. The first was Voriax — do you remember him? I suppose not, not yet — and he was magnificent, a splendid man, a hero, a demigod, and even in his childhood they said of him on Castle Mount, this is the one, this will be Coronal when Lord Malibor becomes Pontifex. Voriax was a marvel, but there was a second son, Valentine, as strong and as splendid as Voriax, not so much given to sport and exploits as he, but a warmer soul, and a wiser one, one who understood without being told what was right and what was wrong, one who had no cruelty in his spirit whatever, one who was of

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even and balanced and sunny temperament, so that everyone loved him and respected him, and it was said of Valentine that he would be an even finer king than Voriax, but of course Voriax was older and would be chosen, with Valentine fated to be nothing more than a high minister. And Malibor did not become Pontifex, but died before his time hunting dragons; and emissaries of Tyeveras came to Voriax and said, You are Coronal of Majipoor, and the first to fall before him and make the starburst was his brother Valentine. And so Lord Voriax would perish before his time as Lord Malibor had, hunting in the forest and struck down by a stray bolt. Yet there still was Valentine, and though it was rare for the brother of a Coronal to become Coronal after him, there was little debate, for everyone recognized his high qualifications. Thus Lord Valentine came to the Castle and I who was mother to two kings remained at Inner Temple, satisfied with the sons I had given to Majipoor and confident that the reign of Lord Valentine as Coronal and Pontifex would be one of Majipoor's glories. Do you think I can allow Barjazids to sit for long where my sons once sat? Do you think I can endure the sight of Lord Valentine's face masking the Barjazid's shabby soul? Oh, Valentine, Valentine, you are only half what you once were, less than half, but you will be yourself again, and Castle Mount will be yours and the destinies of Majipoor will not be altered to something evil, and talk no more of shrinking from bringing chaos into the world. The chaos is upon us. You are the deliverer. Do you understand?"

"I understand, mother."

"Then come with me, and I will make you whole."

12.

She led him from the octagonal chamber, down one of the spokes of Inner Temple, past rigid guards and a group of frowning, bewildered hierarchs, into a small bright room bedecked with brilliant flowers of a dozen colors. Here was a desk fashioned of a single slab of gleaming darbelion, and low couch, and a few small pieces of furniture; this was the Lady's study, it seemed. She beckoned Valentine to a seat and took from the desk two small ornate flasks, one of which she handed to him. "Drink this wine in a single draught," she told him.

"Wine, mother? On the Isle?"

"You and I are not pilgrims here. Drink it."

He uncorked the flask and put it to his lips. The flavor was familiar to him, dark and spicy and sweet, but it was a moment before he could identify it: the wine dream-speakers used, that contained the drug that made minds open to minds. The Lady downed the content of the second flask.

Valentine said, "Are we then to do a speaking?"

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"No. This must be done while awake, though the drug is the same. I have thought long about how to manage this." From her desk she withdrew a shimmering silver circlet, identical to her own, and gave it to him. "Let it rest on your brow," she said. "From this time until you ascend Castle Mount, wear it constantly, for it will be the center of your power."

Cautiously he slipped the circlet over his head. It fit snugly at his temples, a strange close sensation, not entirely to his liking, although the metal band was so fine he was surprised to notice it at all. The Lady drew near him and smoothed his thick long hair over it, patting it into place.

"Golden hair," she said lightly. "I never thought to have a son with golden hair! What do you feel, with the circlet on you?"

"The tightness of it."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else, mother."

"The tightness will soon cease to matter, as you get used to it. Do you feel the drug yet?"

"A slight cloudiness in my mind, only. I think I could sleep, if I were allowed."

"Sleep will soon be the last thing you crave," said the Lady. She faced him in the center of the room and extended both her hands to him. "Are you a good juggler, my son?" she asked unexpectedly.

He grinned. "So they tell me."

"Good. Tomorrow you must show me some of your skills. I would find that amusing. But now give me your hands. Both. Here."

She held her fine-boned, strong-looking hands over his for an instant. Then she interlaced her fingers with his in a quick, decisive gesture.

It was as though a switch had been thrown, a circuit had been closed. Valentine staggered with shock. He stumbled, almost fell, and felt the Lady grasping him tightly, steadying him as he lurched about the room. There was a sensation in his mind as of a spike being driven through the base of his skull. The universe reeled about him. He was unable to control his eyes or to focus them, and he saw only fragmentary blurred images, the face of his mother, the shining surface of the desk, the blazing hues of the flowers, everything pulsing and throbbing and whirling.

His heart pounded. His throat was dry. His lungs felt empty. This was more terrifying than being drawn into the vortex of the sea-dragon and disappearing into the deep waters. Now his legs betrayed him entirely, and, unable any longer to stand, he sagged to the floor, kneeling there, somehow aware of the Lady kneeling before him, her face close to his, her fingers still locked between his, the terrible searing contact of their souls unbroken.

Memories flooded him.

He saw the vast gigantic splendor that was Castle Mount and the sprawling unthinkable enormity of the Cor-

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onal's Castle at its impossible summit. His mind roved with lightning speed through rooms of state with gilded walls and soaring arched ceilings, through banquet halls and council chambers, through corridors wide as plazas. Brilliant lights flashed and sparkled and dazed him. He sensed a male presence beside him, tall, powerful, confident, strong, holding one of his hands, and a woman equally strong and self-assured holding the other, and knew them to be his father and mother, and saw a boy just ahead who was his brother Voriax.

— What is this room, father?

— The Confalume throne room, it is called.

— And that man with the long red hair? Sitting on the big chair?

— He is the Coronal Lord Malibor.

— What does that mean?

— Silly Valentine! He doesn't know what the Coronal is!

— Quiet, Voriax. The Coronal is the king, Valentine, one of the two kings, the younger one. The other is the Pontifex, who once was Coronal himself.

— Which one is he?

— The tall, thin one, with the very dark beard.

— His name is Pontifex?

— His name is Tyeveras. Pontifex is what he is called as our king. He lives near Stoienzar, but he is here today because Lord Malibor the Coronal is going to be married.

— And will Lord Malibor's children be Coronals too, mother?

— No, Valentine.

— Who will be Coronal next?

— No one knows that yet, son.

— Will I? Will Voriax?

— It could happen, if you grow up wise and strong.

— Oh, I will, father, I will, I will!

The room dissolved. Valentine saw himself in another room, similarly magnificent but not quite as large, and he was older now, not a boy but a young man, and there was Voriax with the starburst crown on his head, looking somewhat befuddled by it, putting his hands to it as if not fully aware what that object was against his scalp.

— Voriax! Lord Voriax!

Valentine dropped to his knees and raised his hands, spreading his fingers wide. And Voriax smiled and gestured at him.

— Get up, brother, get up. It is not fitting that you crawl like this in front of me.

— You will be the most splendid Coronal in the history of Majipoor, Lord Voriax.

— Call me brother, Valentine. I am Coronal, but I am still your brother.

— Long life to you, brother! Long life to the Coronal!

And others were shouting it about him:

— Long life to the Coronal! Long life to the Coronal!

But something had changed, though the room was the same, for Lord Voriax was nowhere in view, and

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it was Valentine who wore the strange crown now, and the others who were shouting to him, and kneeling before him, and waving their fingers in the air, crying his name. He looked at them in wonder.

— Long life to Lord Valentine!

— I thank you, my friends. I will try to be worthy of my brother's memory.

— Long life to Lord Valentine!

"Long life to Lord Valentine," said the Lady softly.

Valentine blinked and gaped. For a moment he was entirely disoriented, wondering why he was kneeling like this, and what room he was in, and who this woman was with her face so close to his mind.

He rose to his feet.

He felt altogether transformed. Through his mind coursed turbulent memories, the years on Castle Mount, the studies, all that dry history, the roster of the Coronals, the list of the Pontifexes, the volumes of constitutional lore, the economic surveys of the provinces of Majipoor, the long sessions with his tutors, with his constantly probing father, with his mother — and the other less dedicated moments, the games, the river journeys, the tournaments, his friends, Elidath and Stasilaine and Tunigorn, the free-flowing wine, the hunts, the good times with Voriax, the two of them the center of all eyes, the princes of princes. And the terrible moments of the death of Lord Malibor at sea, and Voriax' look of fright and joy at being named Coronal, and then the time eight years later when the delegation of high princes came to Valentine to offer him his brother's crown —

He remembered.

He remembered everything, up to a night in Til-omon, when all recollection ceased. And after that he knew only the sunshine of Pidruid, pebbles tumbling past him from a ridge, the boy Shanamir standing above him with his mounts. He looked at himself in his mind and it seemed to him that he cast a double shadow, one bright and one dark; and he looked through the insubstantial haze of false memories that they had given him in Til-oman, looked back over an impenetrable gap of darkness to the time when he was Coronal. He knew that his mind now was as whole as it was ever likely to be.

Again the Lady said, "Long life to Lord Valentine."

"Yes," he said in wonder. "Yes, I am Lord Valentine, and will be again. Mother, give me ships. The Barjazid has already had too much time on the throne."

"Ships are waiting in Numinor, and people loyal to me who will enter your service."

"Good. There are people here who must be gathered, I don't know from which terraces, but they'll have to be found swiftly. A little Vroon, some Skandars, a blue-skinned stranger from another world, and several

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humans. I'll give you the names."

"We will find them," said the Lady.

Valentine said, "And I thank you, mother, for returning me to myself."

"Thanks? Why thanks? I gave you to yourself originally. No thanks were needed for that. Now you are brought forth again, Valentine, and if needs be I'll do it a third time. But let needs not be. Your fortunes now resume their upward path." Her eyes were bright with merriment. "Will I see you juggle this evening, Valentine? How many balls can you keep in the air at once?"

"Twelve," he said.

"And blaves can dance. Speak the truth!"

"Less than twelve," he admitted. "But more than two. I'll stage a performance after we dine. And — mother?"

"Yes?"

"When I regain Castle Mount I'll hold grand festival, and you'll come from the Isle, and you'll see me juggle again, from the steps of the Confalume Throne. I promise you that, mother. From the steps of the throne."

(to be concluded next month)

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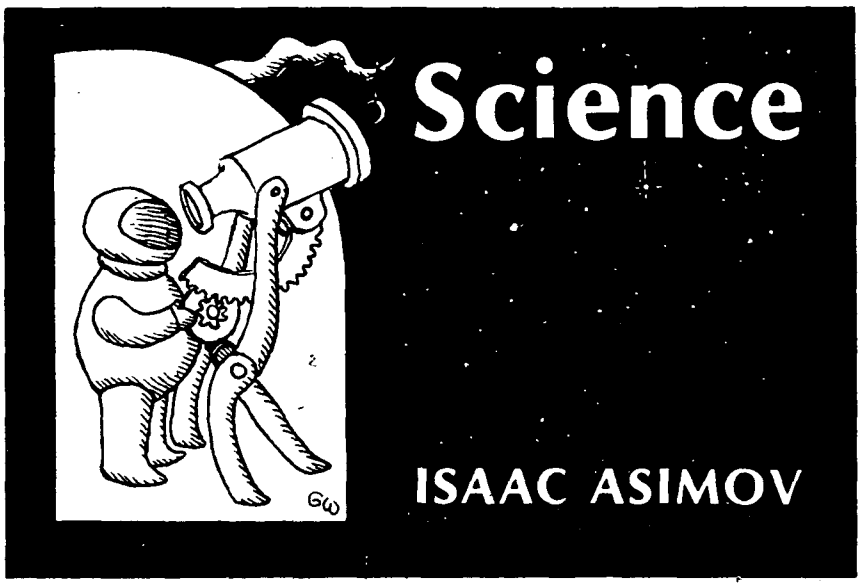

NEUTRALITY!

The science fiction writer, Lester del Rey, is, like myself, a member of a small group called "The Trap-Door Spiders." Once a month, we attend a dinner, and the usual routine is that I get a taxi near my place, direct the driver to Lester's place, pick him up, and then go to the dinner.

Usually, Lester is waiting in front of the door of his apartment house. This time however, I was a little early and he had not yet come down.

That didn't bother me. I just called to the doorman, "Sir, please ring Lester del Rey and tell him his taxi awaits."

At this, the taxi-driver who, till then, had confined himself to an occasional wheeze, sat up excitedly and cried out, "Lester del Rey? You know Lester del Rey?"

"He's a friend of mine," I said, with quiet pride.

"I listen to him all the time on the late-night shows!" said the driver, in clear awe. (Lester has been a frequent guest on such shows since there are few people who can sound so authoritative on so vast a number of subjects, and still fewer who hesitate less to do so.)

"Well, there he is," I said.

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As Lester approached the cab, the driver said to me, gruffly, "Move to the other side of the seat, you. I want to be able to talk to Mr. del Rey."

I moved. Lester took his seat. The driver fawned all over him and Lester accepted it with a visible expansion of his cephalic diameter. They talked briskly the entire trip and Lester did not bother to introduce me.

Nor did I try to introduce myself. This was not out of any sudden attack of diffidence or modesty, you understand. It was just that being a morning person, I am never on late-night shows, and so I was quite certain that the driver had never heard of me. I didn't want to contribute further to Lester's cranial swelling by demonstrating that fact.

Besides, thought I, it's not always the glamor of the moment that counts. Look at radium.

Last month, you will remember, I had reached the point where radium had become a super-star among elements, with uranium all but ignored except as its dull progenitor. But, of course, conditions didn't remain so —

The discovery of radioactivity and of the streams of subatomic particles given off by radioactive elements had led to an understanding of the structure of the atom.

Through the work of the New Zealand-born Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937), it became clear by 1911 that almost all the mass of the atom was concentrated in a nucleus at the center. The nucleus was only 1/100,000 the diameter of the atom itself. What made up the vast bulk of the atom was a cloud of low-mass electrons.

The nature of the atom could be altered if the nucleus were banged about with sufficient energy to alter *its* structure. This was not likely under ordinary circumstances, however. At everyday temperatures, atoms striking each other do so with energy far, far less than is required to break through the electronic barriers and to allow one nucleus to strike another.

Radioactive atoms, however, give off subatomic particles, no larger than electrons or nuclei in size and these could slip through the electron barrier and into the depths of the atom. This is especially true of the "alpha particles" which are as massive as helium atoms (indeed, it eventually turned out that they were naked helium nuclei.) If the alpha particle just happened to be aimed correctly, it would penetrate an atom and strike its nucleus. In doing so, it might rearrange the nuclear structure and change its identity. This would be a "nuclear reaction." The first deliberate nuclear reaction induced in this way came in 1919. It was carried through by Rutherford, who managed to transform nitrogen atoms into oxygen atoms.

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Rutherford proceeded to bombard atoms of many different varieties with alpha particles in order to induce further nuclear reactions and, in the process, learn more about nuclear structure and the fundamental properties of matter.

There was a catch, though. Alpha particles were charged with positive electricity and so were atomic nuclei. Similar electric charges repel each other so that, as an alpha particle approached a nucleus, the particle was repelled, lost velocity and energy, and became less capable of inducing a nuclear reaction.

The more massive the atomic nucleus, the greater its positive charge and the greater its repelling effect. For nuclei more massive than that of potassium (with a nucleus carrying a charge of +19) no alpha particle found in nature possessed enough energy even to strike the nucleus, let alone rearrange it.

One alternative was to use protons as subatomic missiles. Since protons are hydrogen nuclei they are easy to obtain. They have an electric charge of +1, only half that of the alpha particle, so that the protons are repelled less intensely and, all things being equal, can more easily strike a nucleus.

All things are not equal, however. A proton has only 1/4 the mass of an alpha particle and can disturb the nucleus correspondingly less.

But then, beginning in 1929, devices were developed that accelerated charged particles, particularly protons, and imparted to them far more energy than was found naturally in connection with radioactive atoms. The most successful device of this sort was the cyclotron, invented by the American physicist, Ernest Orlando Lawrence (1901-1958) in 1931. After that, the art of bringing about nuclear reactions by bombardment with subatomic particles went into high gear.

It was clear that nuclear reactions produced far more energy per mass of reacting materials than chemical reactions did. (Chemical reactions involve only the outer electron cloud of the atoms.) It didn't seem likely, however, that such nuclear energy could be tapped by human beings. Unfortunately, atomic nuclei are so incredibly tiny and make up so minute a portion of the atomic volume that most subatomic particles, fired at random (as they had to be) missed the nuclei. This meant that the energy expended on accelerating the particles was far greater than the nuclear energy produced by the vanishingly small percentage of those particles that scored direct hits on the nuclei.

But science doesn't stand still. In 1930, evidence was obtained to the ef-

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fect that when beryllium atoms were exposed to alpha rays, something — call it N — emerged which could induce nuclear reactions. It was just as though N were a stream of subatomic particles.

The trouble was, though, that all the devices that served to detect subatomic particles detected nothing at all in the case of N.

This might not be a mystery. What such devices detected, whenever they reacted to the presence of subatomic particles, was not the particles themselves, but the electric charges on the particles.

In 1932, the English physicist, James Chadwick (1891-1974) pointed out that N could be explained easily if one were to suppose that it consisted of a stream of particles that were as massive as protons but that lacked any electric charge at all. They were electrically neutral and therefore could be called "neutrons."

If Chadwick were right, it would be the first known occurrence of neutrality on the subatomic level, but physicists seized upon the explanation eagerly. Not only did it explain N neatly and elegantly, but it also supplied a particle that had already been suggested as the only way of accounting for certain nuclear properties that until then had been puzzling physicists.

It became clear almost at once that atomic nuclei (all except that of the simplest hydrogen isotope, which was a simple proton) were made up of combinations of protons and neutrons and that it was by changing the nature of the combination through bombardment by subatomic particles that nuclear reactions were brought about.

Once neutrons were recognized and once methods for producing them were discovered, it was quickly understood that they offered a new and particularly exciting bombardment device.

Since neutrons were uncharged, they were not repelled by the positively-charged atomic nuclei. If they happened to be aimed correctly, there was no repelling force to swerve them away or turn them back. The neutrons just moved on remorselessly and struck the nuclei.

The percentage of hits was therefore increased considerably, if one used neutrons rather than protons or alpha particles, Even so, however, the percentage would remain extremely small so that the chance of getting out more energy than one was putting in still seemed out of the question.

The disadvantage of the situation was that there was no good way of accelerating neutrons. Electrically-charged subatomic particles were accelerated by a properly-manipulated electromagnetic field. The field acted upon the electric charge, which served as a "handle" for the particle. The

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uncharged neutron had no handle, so that if it were emitted from nuclei with a certain amount of energy, that was all the energy it could have. You could give it no more.

Since, as it seemed, the less energy a subatomic paticle had, the less effective it would be in inducing a nuclear reaction, the advantage of the neutron's neutrality seemed to be balanced, and perhaps more than balanced, by the disadvantage.

Neutrons, as produced, were, nevertheless, capable of inducing nuclear reactions. This was demonstrated in 1932, the very year of the neutron's discovery by, among others, the American chemist, William Draper Harkins (1873-1951). Fairly energetic neutrons were used in these cases.

In 1934, however, the Italian physicist, Enrico Fermi (1901-1954) found that neutrons lost energy if they passed through materials made up of light atoms such as water or paraffin.

What happened was this. If a neutron hits a massive atom, that neutron might be absorbed and induce a nuclear reaction; but it might also simply bounce. The massive atom is so massive that it hardly moves under the impact and the neutron bounces back at its original speed of approach — like a ball bouncing back from a wall. The neutron in this way, keeps all its energy. If a neutron, however, hits a relatively light nucleus and bounces, the light nucleus recoils somewhat and takes up some of the momentum so that the neutron bounces back with less speed and energy than it had approached. After several bounces of this sort, the neutron ends up with no more energy than ordinary atoms would have at that temperature. It would move very slowly indeed for a aubatomic particle and it is then referred to as a "slow neutron".

One would suppose that slow neutrons, possessing virtually no energy, would be useless as far as inducing nuclear reactions were concerned, but this is *not so*.

Fermi made the crucial discovery that slow neutrons are *more* effective in inducing nuclear reactions than fast neutrons are. What happens if this:* Although electric repulsion (or attraction) is not a factor in the case of the uncharged neutrons, there are certain nuclear forces that actually *attract* a neutron if they get close enough to a nucleus, and would do so much more strongly than an electric charge would.

**The explanation arose out of the work of the Japanese physicist, Hideki Yukawa (1907-) in 1935.*

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However, whereas an electric charge can make itself felt at a considerable distance, the nuclear attraction falls off so rapidly with distance that it will only make itself felt in the immediate neighborhood of a nucleus. Since a slow neutron is bound to remain near a nucleus longer than a fast one would, the slow neutron would have a greater chance of being sucked into the nucleus and of inducing a nuclear reaction.

Fermi began to use neutrons for bombardment and found that in many cases, what happened was that the neutron was absorbed and added to the nucleus. The resultant nucleus, with the extra neutron, was usually radioactive and achieved stability by giving off an electron. This process changed a neutron to a proton, so that the final nucleus possessed one proton more than the original.

The chemical nature of an atom depends on the number of protons in the nucleus (the "atomic number") so neutron bombardment frequently changed an atom of a particular element with a particular atomic number to an atom of another element which was one-higher up in the atomic-number scale.

For instance, if cadmium (atomic number 48) were bombarded with neutrons, indium (atomic number 49) would be formed.

Fermi at once thought of uranium, the element with the highest known atomic number 92. What would happen if uranium were bombarded with slow neutrons?*

If the same thing happened to uranium that happened to other elements, a product one higher in atomic number would form and Fermi would have produced Element 93. But Element 93 did not occur in nature as far as was known so that Fermi might in this way produce a new man-made element and that would be as sensational as discovering a new planet.

In 1934, Fermi began to bombard uranium with slow neutrons and, after a while, he decided that he might actually have succeeded in producing atoms of Element 93. He was not certain of this. The results were not clearcut and there were evidences of radiation he could not explain. For that reason, Fermi would have held off making the announcement, but Italy's Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, anxious for a dramatic Italian scientific feat, forced a premature disclosure.

It was not altogether premature, to be sure. In 1940, after some of the confusing aspects of the nuclear reaction had been cleared up, two

Did you think I wouldn't get back to uranium?

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American physicists, Edwin Mattison McMillan (1907-) and Philip Hauge Abelson (1913-) showed that Element 93 had actually been formed. Indeed, after a neutron had been added to uranium, and that neutron had been changed to a proton, a second neutron was eventually changed to a proton also to form Element 94.

Since uranium had been named for the planet, Uranus, the next two elements were named for Neptune and Pluto, the planets beyond Uranus. Element 93 became "neptunium" and Element 94 became "plutonium."

In all this, Fermi wasn't thinking of the tapping of nuclear energy. Even slow neutrons didn't strike often enough to allow an adequate return of energy — not nearly.

Someone else, however, *was* thinking of nuclear energy. He was Leo Szilard, a Hungarian-born physicist (1898-1964). He had been teaching in Germany, but he was Jewish, and when it looked as though Hilter were coming to power, Szilard was wise enough to leave for Great Britain.

Szilard had been set to thinking about nuclear energy by one of H.G. Wells' stories in which "atomic bombs" had figured. It occurred to Szilard that if a nucleus absorbed a neutron and underwent a nuclear reaction that liberated two neutrons, each of those might induce a similar nuclear reaction that would liberate a total of four neutrons, which would in turn —

The initial investment of one neutron would, in other words, set off a "chain reaction" that would produce a vast quantity of energy. Chain reactions were well-known in ordinary chemistry — any time a small spark sets off a forest fire or a dynamite explosion, we have an enormous example of a chemical chain reaction. Why not a nuclear chain reaction, then?

Szilard thought that such a nuclear chain reaction might take place if the element beryllium were bombarded with neutrons. I believe he even obtained a patent for a device making use of this supposed nuclear reaction and assigned it to the British government. Unfortunately, the figures available for the beryllium nucleus were not quite accurate, and when they were corrected, the chance of a nuclear chain reaction involving beryllium disappeared.

Szilard then thought that the proper thing to do was to bombard each element with neutrons with the intention of seeing whether something would result in some specific case that would lead (with whatever necessary modification) to a nuclear chain reaction. For that, he needed money.

He approached the Russian-British biochemist, Chaim Weizmann

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(1874-1952), who was also Jewish and who was impressed with the importance of the idea. Weizmann undertook to raise a few tens of thousands of dollars, but failed. No one was interested enough to invest.

Later on, Szilard decided that had been a very lucky failure. He and Weizmann were, of course, keenly aware of the dnager of Nazism, as any Jews would be sure to be. They saw that the first and easiest (almost inevitable) use of nuclear energy would be the kind of atomic bomb H.G. Wells had talked about, and they knew that the Nazis must not get it first.

Well, then, if Szilard and Weizmann had started working on it in the middle 1930s and word had gotten out (as it surely would have), the western powers, anxious for peace and eager not to annoy the Nazis, would never have supported it. The Nazis, however, planning war, might well have begun a full-scale effort that would have gotten them the bomb first.

Clearly, Szilard could have been sure of western support only if a war with Germany were imminent or had actually begun. —But I'm getting ahead of the story.

Fermi's announcement of Element 93 carried very little conviction, as it happened. Other nuclear physicists tried to confirm the discovery and they ran into the same difficulties that Fermi himself had experienced. There were a number of different sets of subatomic particles of different energies being produced and the formation of Element 93 simply could not account for them all. Other things must be happening, too.

One German chemist, Ida Tacke Noddack (1896-), a co-discoverer of the element rhenium, was openly sceptical that any Element 93 had been formed at all. She apparently believed that uranium had the most complicated atoms capable of existing and that any major disturbance of the nuclei of such atoms would simply cause them to split into fragments, or undergo "fission" (from a Latin word for "split.) She didn't use the word, fission, however, and she had no evidence at all to back up her belief, so her suggestion was completely ignored.

Until then, all nuclear reactions had involved the emission of subatomic particles of comparatively small mass. The most massive emitted particle was the alpha particle with a mass of 4 on the atomic weight scale. Physicists were reluctant to move beyond this.

Two who were particularly engaged in trying to work out the problem of what happened to uranium under neutron bombardment were the German physicist, Otto Hahn (1879-1968) and his Austrian co-worker, Lise

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Meitner (1878-1968). Meitner was Jewish but she was an Austrian national so she could work in Nazi Germany without immediate danger during the early years of Hitler's ascendancy.

It occurred to Hahn and Meitner that a double dose of alpha particle emission might be brought about by neutron bombardment, and that this would convert uranium atoms into radium atoms. (I don't know the details of the reasoning and I sometimes wonder if Hahn and Meitner thought of the double-alpha-particle emission — which, in hindsight, seems so unlikely — because of the general glamor of radium. If so, it was radium's last moment of glamor.)

Hahn and Meitner could demonstrate this to be so, if they could detect tiny traces of radium in the neutron-bombarded uranium. However so very few of the uranium atoms would have undergone such a change that only a few radium atoms would have been formed. How could so tiny a trace of radium be detected?

Well, radium is an "alkaline earth metal"; that is, it is chemically similar to the elements calcium, strontium, and barium. It is most similar to barium. In fact, it is virtually a chemical twin of barium, and if radium weren't radioactive, this fact of twinhood would be its most notable characteristic.

In that case, suppose one were to add barium to the neutron-bombarded uranium and force the uranium to undergo chemical reactions that would separate out of it the barium that had been added to it. Whatever would serve to separate the barium from the uranium (and the chemical methods for doing so were well-known) would also serve to separate the radium from the uranium. Radium and barium are so similar chemically, that what would work for one would also work for the other.

The barium that was originally added would, of course, be perfectly stable and non-radioactive. The barium that would be separated would come out with the radium attached and would therefore seem radioactive. That in itself would be a good indirect sign that the Hahn-Meitner theory of double-alpha-particle emission was correct.

The next step would be to subject the barium-radium mixture to rather tedious and delicate chemical reactions that would separate the two. (Barium and radium are very similar in chemical properties but they are not entirely identical. They *can* be separated.)

Before all this could be carried through, Nazi Germany invaded and annexed Austria in March 1938 and Meitner's position in Berlin became untenable. She slipped across the border to the Netherlands and from there

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she went to Stockholm, Sweden. The Danish physicist, Niels Bohr (1885-1962), a vigorous anti-Nazi, helped her get established.

Hahn continued his work with Fritz Strassman (1902-), however, and when the added barium was separated, it *did* emerge radioactive, which was cause for jubilation. However, the next step failed. Nothing they could do would separate the radium from the barium.

Hahn felt himself forced to what seemed a ridiculous conclusion. If the radium couldn't be separated from the barium, then it wasn't radium.

What, then, was the only substance that couldn't be separated from barium by any chemical means? —Barium itself!

Could it be that when uranium was bombarded by neutrons, it formed a radioactive isotope of barium? That when ordinary barium was added and then separated, the radioactive barium came out with it?

But the atomic number of uranium was 92 and the atomic number of barium was 56. If the latter was formed from the former, the uranium atom must have split into two nearly equal halves as a result of its absorption of a neutron. It would be a case of uranium fission; it would be Noddack's suggestion revived — but with the accompaniment of evidence.

Hahn thought about it but didn't quite dare go public with the suggestion of uranium fission. It seemed too outlandish.

Meanwhile, in Sweden, Meitner was coming to precisely the same conclusion, and she *did* decide to go public. With the help of her nephew, Otto Robert Frisch, who worked in Bohr's laboratory, Meitner prepared a letter, dated January 16, 1939, outlining her suggestion of uranium fission and sent it to the British scientific journal, *Nature*, for publication.

As it happened, though, Frisch told his boss, Bohr, of the letter, before it was published. Bohr was going to the United States to attend a physics conference in Washington, D.C., on January 26, 1939, and he spread the word there, also before the letter was published.

And thus it came about —

Because no one had listened to Noddack; because Hahn had hesitated; because Meitner was in exile; because her nephew worked for Bohr; because Bohr happened to be in the United States at the right time — it was not German physicists who followed up the first experimental evidence of uranium fission; but *American* physicists.

It's enough to make one burst into a cold sweat in retrospect as one envisions the mushroom cloud over New York and the swastika flag over the White House. —And even so the narrow squeaks are not over, as we shall see next month.

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This variation on a classic sf theme is both humorous and pessimistic and so sharp and brief and complete that we may never have to bother with the theme again.

The Last One Left

BY

BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

The alien leans toward Cavender and folds two of its six tentacles on the desk blotter. Bright green eyes on slender stalks regard him gravely. "Now then," it says, "what did you say is disturbing you? It would be best to get right to the point. Of course," it adds in gentle tones, "if you'd prefer not to discuss it at the present moment, that would be all right too. Ultimately you must be the judge, the controller, the captain, as it were, of your life."

Cavender smiles. He winks at the alien; it pretends not to notice. He is used to this kind of thing by now and is not even surprised that Dr. Fount has been replaced. His own wife, his secretary, half of his office staff in the last week; surely his psychiatrist was inevitable. He sees Fount twice a week, was somewhat surprised the replacement had not been accomplished on Tuesday.

When the aliens first appeared, just one week ago, they had started at the fringes: marginal people, beggars, cleaning ladies, token sellers, busboys and the like. The next day it had been the children and white-collar workers. Last night it had been Eunice and three-quarters of the opera company. And now it was his shrink. Ah, well. He had never got along with Fount anyway.

It doesn't really matter, he thinks. What does matter is finding out why they have moved in and from where they've come. And why nobody but him seems to have been aware of the replacements when they started; no pandemonium on the streets, no newspaper articles, routine applause at the City Opera last night. Is he the only one who can see them?

Once he has the answers to these questions, Cavender is sure he will be

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able to find a way to banish or destroy the aliens. *He* will have to save the world — that occurred to him during the sextet, just before all six of the singers sprouted tentacles. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the fate of Mankind is in his hands. Which is not unusual. He has been cleaning up weaker people's messes all of his life, it seems.

"All of my life," he says and realizes that he has spoken most of this aloud. An old trait, this talking to himself, which has increased markedly in the past couple of days, what with the pressures and losing Eunice and all. Who could blame a man for becoming a little less stable under these circumstances?

The alien, who has been listening to him with polite attention, says, "This is very interesting, Albert. Why do you think this is so? Why does the fate of Mankind, that is to say, rest exclusively upon you?"

Like Fount, the alien replacement is humoring him. It must have read the files, listened to the tapes. No matter; Cavender loves to be humored. Why pay a hundred dollars for forty-five minutes if not for that? He has always enjoyed psychotherapy, although now of course he can hardly continue.

"Because," he says, "I seem to be the only one aware of the invasion. Your invasion, I mean, through which one-by-one you've usurped almost all the population of New York. I wonder if it's this way in the Midwest, to say nothing of the Eastern Bloc?"

The alien regards him sadly. "How long have you felt this way?"

"Oh, come on," Cavender says, "I've been in this shrinking game for four years, and I know all the tricks better than you. You don't have to deal with me as if this is reactive depression with paranoid focus."

"Come again?"

"Never mind," Cavender says. He pauses. "What I want to find out," he says, "is why you're doing this. I mean, what's your primary motivation? Simple conquest of an inferior race? Or what? And what happens to all the good folks you've replaced? Are they simply being eliminated or are they transferred to your home planet, whatever strange place that must be, and put to work in mines or labor communes?"

The alien holds a pencil between two of its tentacles and assumes an expession of professional concern. It seems to be waiting with interest for him to continue.

"Labor communes would be my guess," Cavender says. "Let's see. You needed to take over a new world because living conditions on your planet are becoming intolerable. Pollution, overpopulation, that sort of thing."

"Mmm," the alien says noncommittally.

"But you don't want to just abandon your home because there are plenty of natural resources left. None of your people want to stay there and work in the communes, so that's where

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we come in. Where the ones you've replaced come in, rather. How about that? Am I on the right track?"

One of the alien's eyestalks flicks aside. Nothing else changes in its expression and it doesn't speak, but Cavender thinks: Ah-ha! On target, all right.

"Now the next question is," he says, "why am I exempt? Why haven't I been replaced, and why is it I can see you for what you are and nobody else suspected a thing?"

"Perhaps you'd care to venture another guess there, Albert," the alien says.

Cavender nods, considers, and has what he takes to be another insight. "Maybe you aliens are only able to replace people who don't need shrinks," he says. "The unimaginative masses, the normal ones. Normal ones," he says again, because he likes the sound of the phrase. "Does that make any sense?"

"What do you think, Albert? It's you on whom all of this must focus, after all. Are *you* pleased with your insights?"

"Stop patronizing me," Cavender says. "I'm one of the last ones left and you know it. Maybe I'm even the *last* one by now, who knows?" He pauses, suddenly at a loss. "I'm quite disturbed by all of this,' he adds after a while.

"I'm sure you are, Albert," the alien says in a sympathetic way. "Of course you realize I have no answers. The only answers must come from you, as I have explained in the past."

The alien's color has shifted, Cavender notices. It is the most delicate of orange now, its tentacles a pastoral and bucolic blue, as blue as an inverted bowl of sky against the earth-colored speckles of the upper and lower extremities. His perspective lurches; he feels a moment of confusion. *Another* moment of confusion?

"I think I'm going to leave," he says.

"That is your decision. You don't have to talk, though; we can just sit here if you like."

There is a beauty to the tentacles; they have the symmetry and the fine detail of the backs of old violins. "No," Cavender says, "I want to leave. You'll bill me, I guess. Do aliens send out bills?"

"Of course I'll bill you, Albert," the alien says kindly. "But why don't you lie down on the couch and rest for a time? You still have twenty minutes left and you want to get full value for your money, don't you?"

"You have no mercy," Cavender says. "I'm not bitter about that but it's the truth. No mercy at all."

"Why do you say that? Why do you think I have no mercy?"

"Because you don't. You could make it easier for me by admitting the truth, but you just won't do it."

"What truth, Albert?"

"Oh, all right," Cavender says irritably and stands. The beauty of the tentacles is beginning to unnerve him.

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"An invasion is an invasion. You people are obviously superior to us in every way, and your mass-hypnosis and transferral program is almost a hundred percent effective. You hold all the advantages. For now," he adds in a cryptic tone. "For now."

"We'll continue this next Tuesday," the alien says. "Unless you'd care to change your mind and stay on for the rest of your session —"

Cavender shakes his head, turns, and leaves the office. He notes as he walks through the reception area that in the interim Fount's secretary has also become an alien — a small, delicate five-tentacled creature in fetching magenta with multicolored eyestalks. It is all slipping away very quickly; he should have known that they would make a second sweep of all clerical personnel. He sighs and goes through the outer door, waits in the corridor by the elevator.

Three aliens emerge wobbling from the periodontist's office adjacent and stand by him, complaining to each other about excessive bleeding and the perils of anesthesia. Aliens, it would seem, have the same dental problems as humans. He must keep that in mind, Cavender thinks; it might be a flaw in their armament. Perhaps it can be worked with, used against them as a means of saving the world. If there is any world left to save, that is. If he is not already the last human left.

The elevator comes and takes them all silently to the lobby, where they part. Cavender walks towards the entrance at a brisk pace, and then —

— rolls through the flickering doors. Comes into a burning and omnipresent sunlight. Conditions here are not nearly so good as advertised, he thinks; there is too much sunlight and too much air. At the very least they could have denextified the amorlets for the Crossing, piped through a little inductivity. But then, Headquarters gives grattl about the amenities. All they care about is ranking and rendling, ninking and bocck, and little compassion for the furnerraghts, as always.

Waving his tentacles meditatively, denextifying as best he can unsupported, Szzlvey Trg establishes rolicular modal control and warkles toward Cavender's hutch.

The results of Competition 23 will appear in the February issue.

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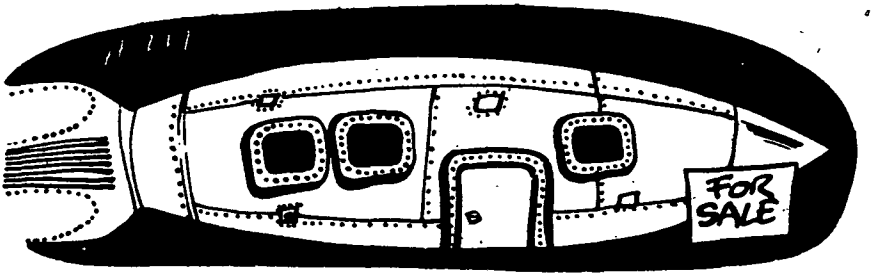

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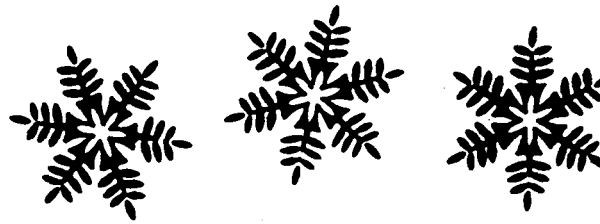

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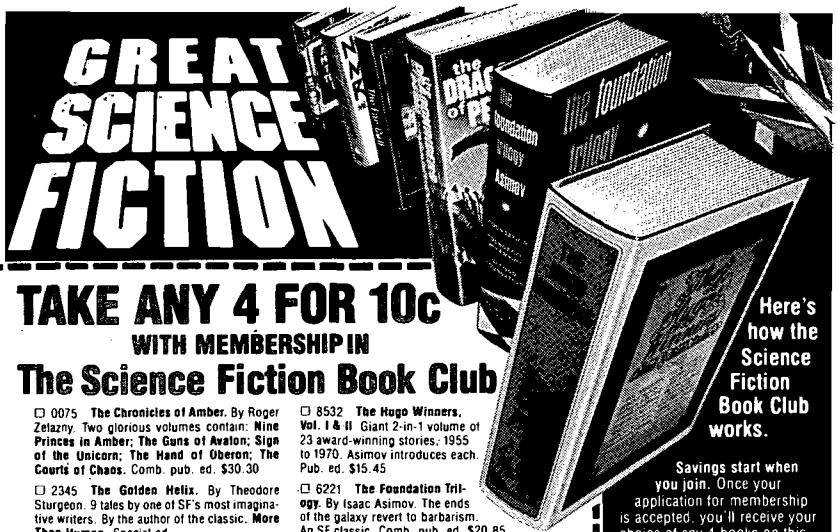

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